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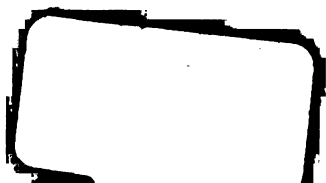
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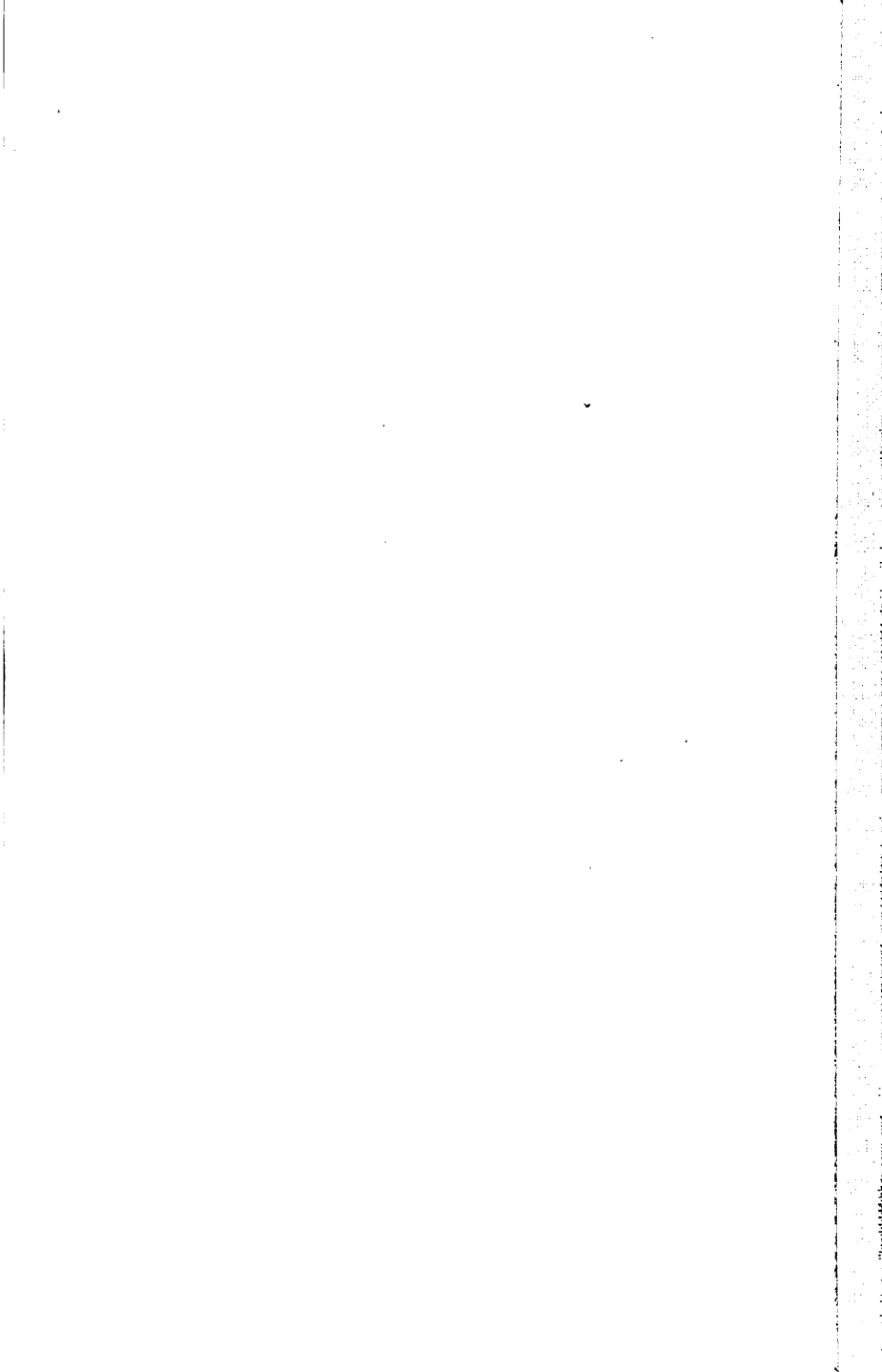
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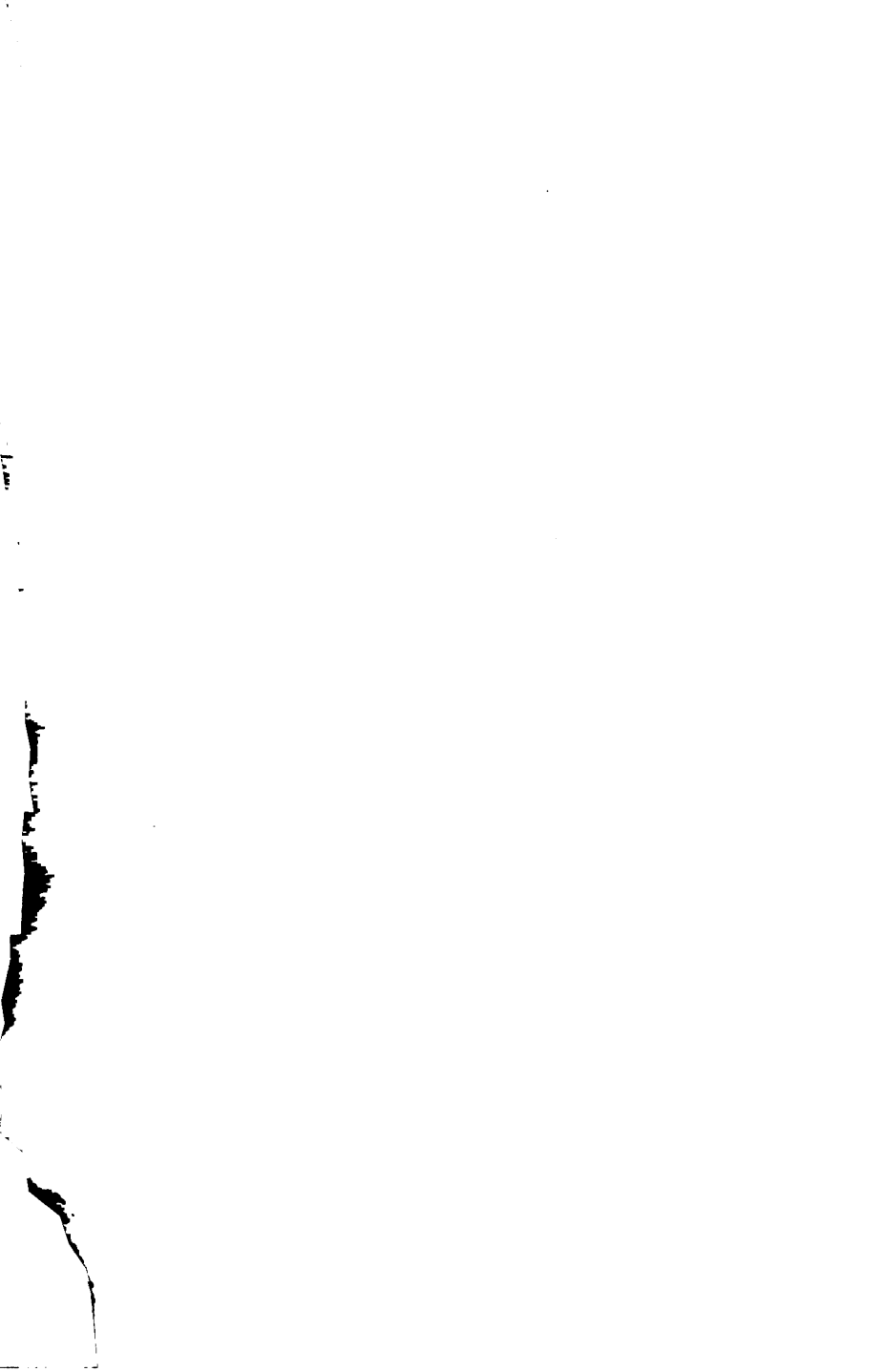
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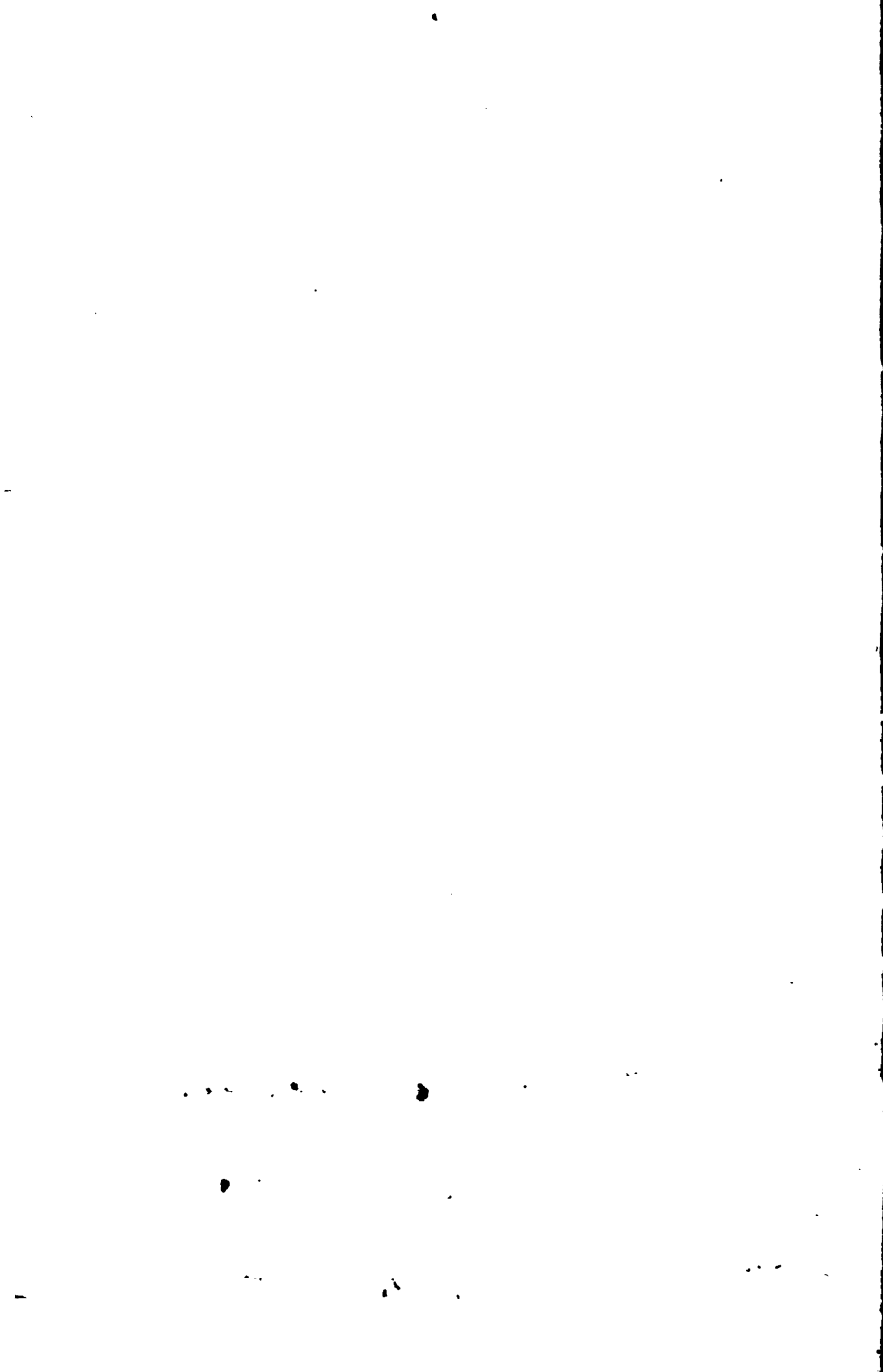




THE IRON WAY

To my dear sister
Ralph.

- San Francisco July 1917.



THE IRON WAY

A TALE OF THE BUILDERS
OF THE WEST

BY
SARAH PRATT CARR

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS BY
JOHN W. NORTON

THIRD EDITION



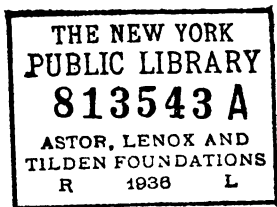
CHICAGO
A. C. McClurg & Co.

1907

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Published March 23, 1907
Second Edition, March 30, 1907
Third Edition, April 13, 1907



THE LAKESIDE PRESS
R. DONNELLEY & SONS COMPANY
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To My Father

**WHOSE MEMORIES OF THOSE HEROIC TIMES IN WHICH
HE PLAYED A FAITHFUL PART
HAVE BEEN INVALUABLE, THIS BOOK IS
AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED**

FOREWORD

THE discovery of gold in California aroused the attention of the whole civilized world and caused the migration of vast numbers of people from "the States" to the Pacific Coast.

The means of reaching the gold fields were by the long and tedious voyage "around the Horn," by enduring the scarcely lesser hardships of two voyages and overcoming obstacles almost insurmountable in crossing the Isthmus, or by a still more arduous journey of thousands of miles across the continent, traversing great plains, climbing precipitous and rugged mountains, and, parched with thirst, wearily making a journey through desert sands and death valleys, along a forlorn track which may even now be traced by skulls and bones of men and beasts who perished by the way, still whitening in the sun.

It is not strange that a people of such enterprise and resources as ours should, under these circumstances, have been impressed with the importance of making a highway across the continent. The Civil War which followed proved the necessity of bringing the people of all sections of the country into closer relations, and made the necessity of building such a highway imperative.

Among those who made their way to the Western

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Eldorado were the parents of the author of this work, who belonged to one of the best families of the State of Maine. They chose the route across the Isthmus. She, the author, their first child, was a babe, and was carried over the then almost insurmountable barriers which still separate the two oceans, by a native employed for that purpose.

Her father, one of the ablest and most forceful of those pioneers, who is still spared to enjoy the blessings that have come from the great highway, a man of remarkable executive ability, was one among those who helped to build it. He was early placed in positions of importance, involving the management of great properties, and the employment and direction of large bodies of men in the work of construction. When the last spike was driven he entered the operating department of the road, where he remained for more than twenty-five years, serving the major part of this time as Assistant General Superintendent.

When he entered upon the work of construction, he deemed it important to have his family with him, or as near to him as practicable; and while he did not give up his residence in California, he established them in a temporary but comfortable home, which, as the work progressed, was moved on, along the right of way.

In this movable home, in the company of her good mother, and of her father when he could find leisure, and of such guests as dropped in, the author lived much of the time until old enough to be sent away to school. It may be said that she literally grew up along the line of, and with, the Central Pacific Rail-

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way, that Western half of the great highway with which her father was connected. Those parents, themselves having had the advantages of New England schools and New England culture, did not permit their daughter to grow up in ignorance, but gave her the advantages of governesses and teachers, of which, as her writings show, she availed herself in a high degree.

During those years of her early life, this young woman lived and moved and had her being among those who, like her father, were interested in everything affecting the railway and the region through which it was in the course of construction. Everything relating to the great enterprise, the obstacles of every kind, the difficulties of the brave men known as "the big four,"—Leland Stanford, Collis P. Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker,—who financed the road, their trials, disappointments, failures, and successes, in the endeavor to get money and appropriations to carry on the work, the dangers from hostile Indians and from even more savage white men, who sought to turn everybody on the Pacific slope against the enterprise, the efforts to create dissatisfaction among the men who were employed, the obstructions placed upon the tracks when they were completed, and the devotion and faithfulness and self-denial of the men who were loyal, all these matters and all things pertaining to the road were considered and discussed at the fireside, and much of it in her hearing, and there, orders, necessary to provide for emergencies, were frequently formulated.

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It is not difficult to understand that a bright, intelligent, promising girl would have become interested in these conferences and discussions, nor to realize that to them as they went on from day to day she would —

“Seriously incline,

But still the house affairs would draw her thence,
Which, even as she could with haste dispatch,
She'd come again, and with greedy ear,
Devour up the discourse.”

It is hardly probable that any other writer of the present day has garnered up in the storehouse of memory so much of positive knowledge and of tradition relating to the building of this first great highway across the continent as has Mrs. Carr. Many times she has delighted and instructed her friends and relatives with the narration of thrilling adventure and heroic deeds with which she became familiar in those early pioneer days.

It is a matter of gratification that she has consented to take the public into her confidence, and weave some of her recollections into a charming romance, to which she most appropriately and expressively gives the title of *THE IRON WAY*.

CLARK E. CARR.

GALESBURG, ILL., *January 2, 1907.*

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THE IRON WAY

PART I

CHAPTER I

ARROW AND FIRE

HALF a century ago the great region between the Missouri and the Sierra Nevadas, except for Denver, Salt Lake City, and a few mining camps, was a trackless, forestless desolation known only to Indian, coyote, and venturesome emigrant. Yet two men under the golden wing of the Government planted a line of lonely posts, and linked them with a chain of stage coaches. Over this treacherous way sped daily messages, men, and treasure; sped, and arrived,—if frost and Indians permitted.

Late on an autumn afternoon the Overland Mail was toiling sunward up a western rampart of the Rocky Mountains. The only sign of occupancy within was a package suspended from the coach roof and swinging lightly with every lurch. Two passengers were on the box with the driver. The centre man, booked as Alfred Vincent, was slight, fair, and, to the superficial eye, young to boyishness. His air of one bred to the best of city refinements contrasted sharply with the loud

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braggadocio of his fellow-traveller, who had been introduced as Mr. Phineas Cadwallader, though the driver afterwards called him "Blowhard Cad," which nickname he vindicated by a constant stream of gossip. It would have been mere pompous chatter to a heedless ear; but an astute observer would have noted his furtive, narrow-eyed glances at Alfred, his significant pauses, and quick change of subject; would have seen that he was trying to penetrate the reserve, the slight mystery that surrounded his fellow-traveller.

Yet whatever the mystery, Alfred Vincent was now posting westward with a letter in his pocket signed by Collis P. Huntington, and directed to Leland Stanford, Governor of California, and President of the Central Pacific Railroad Company. Alfred paid slight heed to the others. His impatient imagination winged him far from present inaction, over mountain and desert, to the Far West, to unguessed conflicts of the future. There would be toil, he would be tireless; there would be difficulties, he would surmount them; there would be enemies, he would—

"Holy Mackinaw! Only fools would think of building a railroad through this God-forgotten country!"

The caustic sentence roused Alfred from his reverie; and Phineas noted that "railroad" was the magic word that broke the spell. The driver, William Dodge, better known as "Uncle Billy," readjusted his quid of comfort, spat with precision, and touched up a lagging leader with the tip of his rod-long whiplash. "Well, I'm not taking the chances of calling Gove'no' Stanford a fool."

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"Of course he ain't. He don't intend to build any railroad, either. Not over the Sierras, anyway. He's got a better thing." Phineas's sidewise look diligently sought a rift in Alfred's mask.

"Meaning?" Uncle Billy questioned.

"That Dutch Flat Swindle. Those C. P. fellers have their wagon road built over the Sierras, and—"

"How in blazes can they build a railroad, Cad, without a wagon road? Don't they have to feed their advance construction camps? And won't they have to do it for years, while they cut their miles of tunnels?"

"Oh, they'll put their railroad through to Dutch Flat maybe; but from there on they'll go it by mules; take all the toll they can get from the twelve million dollars' freightage Nevada pays every year to the transportation companies. The C. P. people want a bite of Louis McLane's pie, that's all."

"They're going to get it, you bet!" The driver smiled; yet his low, leisurely words seemed a fiat.

"Not by a jugful!" Phineas lifted his voice and pounded the air; and Alfred detected the sham note, the bid for effect. "What do you suppose we are doing along the line? Why, San Francisco merchants can sit in their offices and sell to all California, to Nevada, Idaho, and Southern Oregon, at any price they choose to name. And McLane and all the other transportation folks can haul the goods at their own figures; they won't even let the towns have post offices because they like to carry letters at half a dollar apiece. San Francisco Bay's full of ships, and the mountains

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are full of gold; and we're getting it going both ways, out and in."

"Yes, yo're taking too much," the driver replied. "Yo're killing yo' gold-egg goose."

Phineas's smile was unpleasant. "Oh, no! She's hearty yet. And we won't divvy up the eggs, either, with those seven-by-nine shopkeepers in that mud-hole they call Sacramento. Do you suppose we'll let them make a fishing-pond of the Bay, and a winter watering-place of San Francisco? Not on your gold toothpick!"

Uncle Billy's eye flashed its first hint of resentment. "Stanford's worst enemy would n't think of calling him seven-by-nine; and I reckon California voters'll have something to say. Leland's got right smart influence with them."

"Yes. They voted both State and city bonds, did n't they, Mr. Dodge?" Vincent asked, joining the conversation at last.

"Oh, call me Uncle Billy," said the driver. "It's so long since any one called me Dodge, I need an introduction to the name."

"You bet Stanford's got influence with the voters," Phineas broke in before Uncle Billy came to Vincent's question. "But San Francisco brains and dollars can beat voters any time. Did any of our citizens subscribe for stock? The rabble voted bonds for us, but have the supervisors issued them yet? You bet not!"

"I should think Governor Stanford could compel; the law's with him, is n't it?" Alfred asked, with a languid air that well concealed his interest.

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"Compel? Compel nothing! The law's slower'n molasses at the north pole."

Alfred blew the dust carefully from his sleeve, and readjusted the handkerchief that protected his collar. His immaculateness, which had survived eight days of staging, vexed the less tidy traveller. "John Plumbe, a Welsh engineer of Dubuque, Iowa, as long ago as '36 said that an ocean-to-ocean railroad was entirely feasible. And Judah's maps, McDougall's figures, and A. A. Sargent's common-sense support of the measure, have won at Washington. I think that is too good a beginning to be called an impossible enterprise."

"Where'd you learn so much?" sneered Phineas.

"Through the newspapers, for one source." Alfred became again noncommittal and indifferent.

"Anyway," Phineas persisted noisily, "if anybody's going to build a railroad it'll be McLane and San Francisco. By Hookey! If anybody milks this Government cow you bet it'll be us!"

"Well, we need the railroad," Uncle Billy said positively.

"Need it? What for? Does the East care about us? Not a pin, except for our gold. If they get a railroad they'll demand more of us; and if we don't pony up, they'll ship troops over our own road to whip us in. No, siree! We'll be a Pacific Republic yet, California and the other Coast States. And the renegades, red and white, here in this country that's the back door to hell,"—he waved his hand toward the poison-pooled, sage-fringed plain they were crossing,—“they're just the fellers to stand off Uncle Sam.”

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"Is n't that secession?" Alfred asked with a scrutiny Phineas resented.

"Secession? No, it's self-preservation. Anyway, think of getting a railroad round Cape Horn! It'll take a century!"

"Then they'll tote it across the Isthmus," Uncle Billy said calmly.

"Oh, you're dead stuck on them Sacramento chaps, Uncle Billy; and that is bad for you. They'll bust your game and leave you flat broke."

"Call on me in '70 and—" Uncle Billy began, when a trace caught on a rock and snapped. "Accident numbeh twelve. Thirteen'll be a whoppeh, boys!" he remarked as nonchalantly as if he had only lost a whip snapper in a city street. He stopped the team, handed the lines to Alfred, and stepped lightly down to repair the damage.

"Guess I'll go inside for a nap." Phineas yawned and climbed over the wheel into the stage. "Say, which charmer are you taking this pet to?" he asked, as Uncle Billy put his head through the coach window and anxiously examined the swaying parcel.

"She's travellin' as easy as a pacin' pony," he mused to himself, ignoring the question and mounting to his seat.

"Do you believe the Pacific Railroad can be built?" Alfred inquired, when the swinging six had again settled to their steady trot.

"I'm betting on it."

"But McLane and San Francisco—it's an immense opposition to fight."

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"You're dead right. They're setting up scare-crows all along the line. But Leland Stanford's a good buncombe-buster; an' I'm betting on him and his kyah track!"

Alfred's eyes caught the light of Uncle Billy's enthusiasm. "I think I'll put my hand to their wheel if I can lay hold of a spoke."

Uncle Billy's contempt was poorly concealed as he glanced at the small, gloved hand toying idly with a gold-buckled watch fob. Yet there was something in the young man's face that attracted the driver; and he speculated drowsily upon the motives that had sent this evident flower of the club and the ball-room to the hardships of a new country.

The sun was hot, though the night had been painfully cold. The bare road, now sandy and silent, now rocky and ringing, stretched on and on through unpeopled solitudes. Mountain and cliff, magnified in the clear air, appeared, receded, and advanced,—cheated the imagination with their mysterious semblances to man's structures. Tower, turret, and battlement alternated with cathedral arch and spire. Fortress and temple, war and prayer; Cain ever seeking his brother's blood, Christ ever redeeming. Alfred Vincent thrilled to each of these weird voices from the wilderness. The message of the menacing crags thundered down the track of years that anger had kept glowing dully red; found ready echo in the young man's resentment against an unjust father, and was forever banished.

Yet homesickness gripped him as the rhythmic

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hoof-beats put him added miles from the home he still longed for. He thought of his sorrow-stricken mother, her love unvanquished by any deed of his; of her teaching; of the still more potent example of her pure life;—these memories saddened, yet softened him; blended his eager vision of the approaching West with the benediction of the spired temple. And for a space his heart was attuned to prayer and pæan.

Uncle Billy broke the long silence. "Not yet, my boys," he said affectionately to his team.

They had left the black alkaline water behind, had climbed higher, where a thin film of more innocent-looking water was spread on the drab earth before them. The November sun was summer-strong, the dust intolerable; and the mules coaxed dumbly for water.

"Not yet, boys," Uncle Billy repeated.

"Is n't it safe?"

"Yes, safe, perhaps, but this is the sink of the stream; the creek watch 's a heap-betteh a mile furtheh on."

The mile was semi-perpendicular, and brought them alongside a brawling stream, willow-hung, with splashing trout in the still pools, and wild ducks skimming a large pond at the edge of a small mesa. After welcome draughts for man and mule they veered away to another climb. The gorgeous evening pageant was nearly over when the team swung around a sharp rocky point, and one of the leaders shied far out of the road. The driver brought them about to a quick stand-still, facing back.

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"There's fresh blood ahead. That Cooly mule can smell it a mile; it's the only thing he shies at. Hold these ribbons, young felleh, while I prospect a little."

He came back presently, his weather-beaten face sobered and stern. "Wake up in there! Them Injuns has blocked the road again."

Phineas, suddenly disturbed from his long and noisy nap, climbed out with poor grace. "The old man has no business to send passengers overland without escort. It's an outrage! It is n't my business to clear the road!"

"Here, come up here and hold the team! I'll help the driver," Alfred called.

"No! I cain't trust my team with him! He don't—" Uncle Billy interrupted.

But authority rang in Alfred's tone. The change had been made, and he was already stalking after the driver.

Around the point the sight he suddenly came upon made him reel—turn sick and white.

"I knew it would be too much for you, boy; but now yo're hyah get to work. We have n't a minute to lose."

The road here was a narrow rock-cut. Two white men lay across it, one scalped, the other with his throat gaping horribly, and more than a dozen arrows buried in his flesh. Beyond, the ruins of an emigrant wagon blazed lazily.

"We cain't stop fo' anything but to cleah the road. These tracks come from Anthony's; and they're fresh

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and a heap of 'em. The arrows are nearly all different; that means a lot of tribes." He spoke in low, tense tones while, as fast as possible, he threw the burning debris—wheels, bent iron, charred wood—over the lower side of the cut.

Alfred said nothing but joined in the labor with a quick skill that made Uncle Billy revoke his opinion of the small hands. Alfred's back was turned, yet he could feel—see—those—the gruesome spectacle behind. What could be done? How should they be disposed of?—but there was no time for question.

"Can you beah a hand hyah, Vincent, and quick?"

He turned. The driver had already lifted the shoulders of one; Alfred took the feet.

"Right fo'ward hyah, round the point."

"You—you are n't going to—to leave—"

"Yes, we'll have to, if we don't want to look the same way mighty soon!"

"Can't we put them in the stage? It's awful to leave them!"

"It may be worse to take them; and I'm afraid we'll need the stage for the living if—if we get through."

Alfred said no more; and Uncle Billy warmed to him as he saw the clear-cut jaw set, and a steely light creep into the dark violet eyes.

"He's game!" Uncle Billy whispered to himself.

Gently they disposed of the poor, mutilated bodies, and hurried back to the stage. The driver armed each passenger with a rifle and revolver; and ordering Alfred beside him, and Phineas to keep the lookout

ARROW AND FIRE

from the top, he swung his team into the road, and drove forward through the cut with slash and oath.

Dark was stealing on, yet the sun's good-night glory still lingered, its flaming banners striking into the overhead darkness, flooding earth and heavens with strange, sinister color. But soon the ominous gray settled again into the landscape. Gray shadows skulked behind gray sagebrush,—seemed to move,—did move! There was a pair of gleaming eyes; or was it a trick of the imagination? There were two—a dozen pairs! They were far—no, near! Living points of light, a thousand of them!

“Those far ones close together, they are coyotes, but these on this side are wolves.” Uncle Billy watched them silently as they crept closer and fell in behind the jaded mules. They seemed to emerge instantaneously from the ground, by ones and twos, gathering silently. Uncle Billy stood up and looked back.

“Give 'em a shot, Cadwalladeh. We have n't time to fool with that truck.”

A couple of shots sent them loping off with lugubrious howls. Alfred thought again of what lay behind, and gripped his gun sharply. The team slowed, and Uncle Billy no longer plied the lash.

“See that light there, away yon to the left?”

“Yes.”

“That's Anthony's, the next station. Some one's alive there, and that some one is white, or there would n't be a candle-light; the whole place would be alight.” Relief unspeakable breathed in his words, and a half-mile passed in silence.

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"This is a terrible way to earn a living!" Alfred said at last.

"Yes; but this job's easy compared to the trick the Pony Express boys used to play."

"Oh, those men! They were my boyhood idols; and I don't know that I have any better ones now."

"If you want a heroic story ask about Pony Bob some time. It'll lift yo' hair, certain."

"This is dangerous enough. I wonder the Company can induce men to undertake the work. Don't you find it wearing?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose it is. It's right smart skeery sometimes, 'specially at night when I make the trip alone. And I wonder passengehs don't buck against being sent across without escort, like now."

"They would if they knew what they'd see. But it's infinitely worse for you drivers."

"Well, I reckon the Lord knows his business, an' mine, too. And if He deals the cyards for my last game hyah, an' lets the Injuns win it, I reckon He can judge my soul just as well as if I died in bed o' consumption. I figger all I got to do is to see He don't catch me asleep on the box."

A sudden admiration for this hero of the desert warmed Alfred's heart.

"This time I'd hated to let them bacon-colored critters get me before I got to Anthony's. Those tracks are all *from* Anthony's; and there's more than men and property,—there's Anthony's little gal, and—"

Alfred shivered at the significant pause.

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"Anthony's had hard luck. He's one of God's best, if he is set up a mite queer."

"Does he live alone? Oh, no; I suppose he has a helper as they have at other stations, has n't he?" Alfred hoped the driver would tell him more of the station agent, not because of his own interest in the agent, but that he might be saved from thinking.

"Yes, he has a helper, Gid Ingram; but he's only a boy, if he is big. And Stella, pore little chicken! She—" His voice was unsteady, and the sentence went unfinished.

Alfred waited discreetly.

"Away back in the fifties Anthony struck it rich oveh Washoe way," Uncle Billy began again in a steadier tone. "Struck it powerful rich; panned out money fasteh'n he could count it. And what did he do but put up the durndest biggest palace this side of 'Frisco,—put it up right there where he struck tin. It was a bang-up place fo' sho'; big rooms with floweh gyardens in the carpets, and floweh gyardens on the walls; gold chairs, and looking glasses till yo'd see yo'self so many times yo'd think yo'd got 'em again. And say! stone women round in the cornehs, standing pat on shape all right, but not even making a bluff on clothes! Say! Maybe that's all right; but back in Missouri, where I was raised, we take our women dressed."

"Your folks did n't take to Greek style, then, did they?" Phineas broke in after an astonishingly long silence.

"Maybe climate has something to do with style in

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dress, or undress," Uncle Billy replied judicially. "That there house," he continued presently, "stood in a little artificial-looking gyarden, just as sassy as a jay-bird, setting there on the bare flank of the Si-eery Nevaydys. But the whole blamed outfit looked awful lonesome in spite of bein' so grand and handsome. It seemed durned out of place, like a peafowl in full spread on a snowbank."

"Didn't Mr. Anthony have a family?" Alfred questioned.

"Yes, one little gal; that was all. When he got those domestic cyards dealt out to suit him, he sent back East somewhere for her. She was a peart little slip 'bout nine yeahs old,—come oveh from Sacramento in my stage. I used to drive in God's country those days."

Alfred's imagination was fired by the *heimweh* in Uncle Billy's voice.

"Anthony put her in as mistress of the mansion; an' there she'd sit in her high-backed chair at the head of the table, as big as life, the only bit of crinoline present when he'd give grand dinnehs to the Washoe quality. The men would toast her, and she'd stan' up and bow, solemn as a funeral."

"What? No women at all around her?"

"Oh, he had an old woman to look after her a mite, comb and mend, and such; a good old critteh, but no thoroughbred. And except for her the little one neveh saw any but men."

"How did she learn anything?"

"Anthony himself taught her; he was a teacheh

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once. She was as peart as chain lightning; and he had oodles of books. She could read Latin like a professoh; and befo' she come to long dresses he had a dancing masteh come and stay six months, so's she'd know the ball-room paces."

"But who danced with her?"

"Oh, Gid. The old man put him through the studying; and part of the time dressed him to kill and set him to dancing. Next day the cub had to scour knives and clean piazzas."

"What did Mr. Anthony do that for?"

"Cain't you see? Gid must n't forget his place if he did play with the heiress. Gid'll make or break some day, though. He's poet and money-makeh in one. But he's got the devil's own tempeh."

"By George! It was hard for them to be brought up so."

"You bet! But not a patchin' to this!" Uncle Billy's wide gesture seemed to Alfred to reach beyond the dark desolation, to include all the dreariness man had ever known. "Anthony went flat broke a few yeahs back; lost everything, including his grip. Some friend put in a word for him with the Old Man, and he came oveh hyah to hold up this station."

"Is he going to keep her here always?"

"No, that's fretting him. He told me on the quiet he was fixing to take her inside and put her to school this yeah in San Francisco."

"How old is she?"

"She's young enough. Say, young felleh!" Uncle Billy turned sharply, and his words were stern.

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"Likely she ain't cut afteh the pattern o' crinoline yo're used to; but she's fast colohs all right. And if—we may see mo' like—like what's back yondeh—I want to stake you right now to stand by Stella Anthony."

"You can count on me."

The words were curt, but something in their utterance satisfied the driver.

"Jiminy! The barn's gone!" Uncle Billy exclaimed as the stage drew near a square stone house, loop-holed like a battle ship, with tiny points of light shining through.

A heavy bar rattled to the floor inside, the one door opened cautiously, and a woman appeared holding a candle in her uplifted hand. She was tall and straight, her figure youthful in spite of unusual size; but the flaring flame, gleaming down over her breeze-tossed hair, cast aging shadows on her face; and Alfred saw the candle-stick shake.

"Is that you, Uncle Billy?" The voice was steady, yet Alfred caught its note of terror.

"Yes, honey." Relief and tenderness blended in the answer.

"The Indians—did you get through without any trouble?"

"Yes, without trouble, now that I see my little gal's safe." He was quickly on the ground, his arms around her.

"Oh, Uncle Billy, father's—oh, I don't know where he is! The barn's burned, the stock gone, and Gid and I've fought 'em all—" Her voice broke, and she hid her face on his shoulder.

CHAPTER II

HAIL AND FAREWELL

QUICKLY Stella controlled herself, and was going about the station duties with a quiet calmness that surprised Alfred.

"We've a little barley in here, fortunately, and some blankets for the mules; but the hay's gone. You'll have to unhitch for a few minutes, won't you, Uncle Billy? They can't double without a little rest, can they?"

"Yes, but not for long. We've got to be at Maloney's in time to send help back hyah befo' day. The red devils ain't through hyah; there's whiskey left, and brandy, I see, and—"

"Not so much, Uncle Billy. I burned all the brandy to make bullets,—melted all the pewter stuff, too." As she spoke she took the driver's hat and coat, and Alfred noticed the lingering affection in the eyes that followed her.

"Well, I sweah! I did n't reckon yo' fatheh'd ever be short on ammunition."

"It's ordered long ago, but the agent has n't sent it."

"The Injuns'd do a good job if they'd peel the Old Man's cranium," the man said in a bitter aside. "He deserves it for such neglect."

"Father'll come soon,—I hope." Alfred heard

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fear instead of hope in the tone. "It's too bad that you must help with the team, Uncle Billy."

"That's no matteh. The only thing is to feed and get away as soon as I can. Where'd yo' fatheh go?"

"He took some stock up to the meadows this morning; he should have been back before noon, and—" She stopped abruptly and turned away.

The driver paled, and looked quickly toward a tall young man busy at one of the lockers. He caught the driver's wordless question and nodded significantly.

Stella, facing away from them, was placing dishes on the table. "I'll have supper for you soon," she said presently. "We did n't dare begin to cook before, for fear—for fear—"

"All right, Stella. These passengehs, Mr. Vincent and Mr. Cadwalladeh, will eat; but Gid an' I'll go and look up the old man first."

Stella flashed him a grateful look before nodding to the strangers, the only acknowledgment of the introduction she took time for. She lighted a lantern and set it near the door; brought a whiskey flask from behind the bar, and some white cloth, and placed both beside the lantern.

Alfred sickened at the broken sentences, sinister pauses, and still more sinister preparations; yet intently watched the hurrying workers.

"Gid, take out the barley and feed 'em double measure. I'll help you blanket 'em in a minute."

Gideon shouldered the barley just as Stella pulled a pile of heavy blankets from a shelf. Alfred started

HAIL AND FAREWELL

forward to help her, and felt himself bending under a load that she had lifted with ease.

"I'll take them, stranger." Gideon had dropped the barley and stepped quickly to Stella's side.

Alfred turned, startled at that which his sensitive ear heard in the voice. He met a pair of black, burning eyes in a swarthy face not yet divorced from boyishness, though full manhood spoke from the straight figure and sinewy movements. Alfred needed no interpreter for that jealous look, needed no one to tell him of the instant hostility that lurked in the darkling eye, and found quick response in his own heart. But Alfred's superior breeding recognized this as no time for personal feeling. He relinquished the blankets and retired to his chair, his eyes the busier since hands must be idle.

He looked about, upon the bar in the corner, its glittering glass and one kerosene lamp the only brightness in the gloomy room; upon the dark, weapon-hung walls, and the significant loop-holes that gleamed small and black against the starlit night without. Bare floors, rude home-made furniture—it was life more primitive than Alfred could possibly have imagined ten days before.

One object removed it from savagery, Stella's small cane rocking-chair. It queened the barbarous room, an omen of coming civilization. From the chair to Stella herself, Alfred's eye wandered, noting her incongruous dress, a rich lavender silk skirt, once boasting a train, though now cut half-shoe short, disclosing costly French boots, one torn at the side. Her linen

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waist was jewel-clasped at the white neck, and belted with a zone of quartz crystals clear as diamonds. Her comb, banded with delicate pink coral, held in place a coronet of glinting golden-brown braids, adorning but not disguising the shapeliness of her perfectly poised head. And from all this misplaced elegance a short red calico apron screamed at the eye with the arrogance of a boor in power.

Alfred's fingers ached to tear away the offending scarlet. He speculated over the inherent rudeness, not hinted in Stella's unrustic face, which could prompt such motley garb. His small horizon had not yet included all the phases of love,—certainly not the fondness of those grizzled men—father, station keepers, and stage drivers—who lavished on Stella a wardrobe of heterogeneous splendor, from which she could choose nothing less costly than silk, fortunate if it was dark.

Calmly unconscious of Alfred's scrutiny, Stella was coming and going, preparing the late supper.

The team, unhitched but not unharnessed, was fed, blanketed, and tied to the coach wheels in front of the door; and Uncle Billy stepped inside and addressed Vincent and Cadwallader.

"I reckon you two fellehs will have to take turns gyarding that team while we're gone, if you'd care to get away from hyah with yo' own hair on. Fiah two shots, wait a minute and fiah one, if yo're molested."

"Very well. I'm ready," said Alfred, rising.

Cadwallader was on his feet too. "No, I'll go first.

HAIL AND FAREWELL

Let me know when supper's ready, fair desert Vesta," he said to Stella with a bow, caught up his shotgun, and left the room.

Phineas meant no disrespect; yet Alfred's hot anger rose,—almost escaped his lips. Was it because of the promise he had made to Uncle Billy?

Gideon came in with an armload of wood. Alfred saw him answer the driver's unspoken call, saw both leave the house without looking at Stella, though her apprehensive eyes followed them through the door into the night. He thought of the hideous sight by the roadside, of this desert girl he had promised to protect; and from some unknown depth of his nature a strange power surged, the savage, fighting instinct of his Puritan ancestors that had slept for generations. Silently he pledged his life for her safety.

The simple supper of bacon, biscuits, potatoes, beans, and dried apple pie, was on the table. Stella pushed up a short bench, and beckoned to Alfred.

He rose and shook his head. "No, I'll let Mr. Cadwallader eat first," he said, and took his gun and disappeared.

"Cracky, this is good!" Phineas exclaimed as he looked over the table. "Milk, by the eternal!"

"Yes, but it's our last, I guess. They got the cow. I—" She stopped abruptly.

"These biscuits are all right—have the home touch. And, say! Pie! It's alluring, too. Who, on God's footstool taught you to cook, Miss Anthony?"

"Miss Beecher and—father."

"Here are my respects to Miss Beecher and your

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fa—" He was speaking to air. Stella had left the room.

Phineas was at heart a coward, yet he strove to hide it under bravado; and he took his turn in the darkness with a half merry, half contemptuous badinage that was sufficiently deceiving.

Alfred came in looking girlishly fair and slender against the malefic shadows of the high room, yet Stella recognized the power back of his deceptive physique. She felt, too, his solicitous though unspoken interest in her, and responded with a finer attentiveness than she usually allowed herself to bestow on travellers, an attentiveness that was not coquetry. Rather it was a discernment of something gracious in him, as a man different from those who filled her life.

Alfred ate sparingly, silently, his mind intent on impending tragedy.

"Your hand is hurt, sir," Stella said as she placed the hot bacon before him. Without more words she cut the meat and buttered his biscuit. It was done quickly, incidentally. She did not falter, her face was calm. Yet when she came with old linen and home-made lotions to dress the angry burn, her touch upon Alfred's hand was icy cold.

The dressing was barely finished when Phineas's challenge was heard, and a white man's voice replied.

"That's Curly Joe from Maloney's," Stella said. "Sit still and finish your supper," she added, as Alfred started to his feet. "It's not Indians; you won't be needed."

HAIL AND FAREWELL

Heedless of her words, he followed her to the door, where she stood looking out.

"Curly Joe's brought some stock," she said, glancing over her shoulder as he came near, "some they had a chance to buy, I heard him say. It's in the nick of time for us. He'll leave another team for Uncle Billy, and hurry the rest on to Leeds. Probably the Indians have raided that station too." She stepped back to the table and poured another cup of coffee. "Have this fresh cup, sir. You're not needed — now."

Alfred seated himself, and she went to the kitchen, leaving him to ponder the adverb of time so significantly spoken.

Stella did not return, though Alfred finished his coffee and waited, the minutes dragging with his inaction. There had been a great rattling at the stove and the sound of voices; and after a little the air came hot, through the door. Alfred's curiosity was aroused. What could be doing? Cooking? But why, since they were so soon to leave?

An almost human shriek of terror struck weirdly from the darkness. It came from behind the station. Alfred ran out and around, meeting the odor of burning hair and flesh. There by the light of a single candle two burly men were pressing a red-hot brand on the quivering flanks of screeching mules. And Stella was heating and passing through the window the torture-signs of possession. A sudden aversion for her swept Alfred like a chill. How could she? He could not reconcile the woman and the scene. Tender motherliness was the thought his first vision

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of her had brought him; yet here she was doing fiend's work! He learned a little later that no driver was allowed to take an unbranded animal on the road for thieves, red or white, to capture and re-sell.

The branding was finished and the men had gone on, when the searchers returned. Stella heard them, and hastened to the door, peering into the darkness. A whispered parley kept her waiting. At last Uncle Billy stepped into the light. Stella gave him a quick look, read the answer to her mute question, and fled. Alfred saw her white, set face as she passed, and forgot his disapproval. His heart ached with pity; and with this was blended a sudden and surprising gratitude because his own father yet lived. In a second this girl's sorrow had crucified his years of resentment.

Duty and love are weapons that affliction at her worst is compelled to respect. Alone Stella fought her quick battle for composure; and when she brought in supper for the two men, her face was less stricken than Uncle Billy's. He went to her, took her hands in his own, lifted his reluctant eyes to hers. "Honey, you—you must go—in an houh, less time if possible. You—"

She met his look bravely, her voice unfaltering, though words came lamely. "But father—I cannot leave him. Where—where is he?"

"Child, we buried him,—Gid and me. We did it—good, and I mapped the place, so you can find,—but not any Injun. And, honey, you must—must get ready quick."

Stella's head drooped. Alfred saw her throat

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throb, her hands tighten convulsively on Uncle Billy's.

"But the station, and the Company's property,—I must n't leave that till—" She lifted her face; her lips twitched pitifully.

"Yo' Uncle Billy's captain now. You must go, child. Get yo' things togetheh. Don't forget yo' fatheh's papehs,—those he keeps in his tin chest. Whateveh that contains is yo's. There may be things there yo'll need."

"But the station—" she began again.

"Gid, you tell her you ain't a boy,—yo're a man, and brave enough to stay hyah and keep the station till they send some one from Maloney's."

The boy stepped closer to Stella. She saw a new Gideon, no longer comrade and youth, rather a man and a lover. At another time intuition would have been on duty guarding her. Now grief had captured every sentinel. All that was left of her past, of her home life, was this boyish slave suddenly grown masterful.

"Yes, Stella, you must go. Uncle Billy's the boss. I'll stay, as he says, till the station's manned again; then I'll follow you to—to wherever you go—always."

Alfred's brow darkened.

Stella gazed alternately at her two advisers, dumbly striving to adjust her grief-stricken mind to this hard exigency.

"Oh, Gideon, I can't let you stay alone! I—"

Uncle Billy laid a tender hand on her arm. "Honey!

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Cain't you buck up to the game just a mite? Would n't yo' paw tell you to?"

She nodded and turned aside. Both men looked at her intently, one with a passionately yearning gaze. In a moment she faced them, smiling resolutely, though Alfred saw unheeded tears on her cheek.

"If you and Gid will eat a little supper I'll get ready right away. I'll be—I'll be good." The words trembled off into a sob that was touchingly childlike.

"You go right to Jake Bennett," the driver said as he finished his coffee a little later. "He's on the railroad, at the 'Front,' whereveh that is. You tell him I sent you. Bennett is one of Superintendent Gregory's foremen, a squareh man,—his wife's even squareh,—he'll deal you a straight game, little one. There's Sally B., too, she's white, and can motheh a whole brood like you and not let one chick get a cold toe."

"And I'll follow as soon as I can slip this," Gideon added, his glance sweeping the shadow-peopled room.

"I'm coming myself, honey. I'm coming to be near you, and to watch that Sacramento four tackle the biggest job of building since Babel." Uncle Billy rose and went out.

Soon all was ready. Stella waited by her trunk for the coach to swing round. She wore a dark silk skirt. A pale gray opera cape and Uncle Billy's plume-laden white lace bonnet made a bride of her; but her face was the face of widowhood. A family had been wrecked, tragedies ended, tragedies begun.

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"Oh, Gideon, how can I leave you?" she sobbed as he came to her side. "But I would n't go unless you stayed."

"All aboard, honey!" called the driver's kind voice from the dark. "Salt Lake City in ten hours!"

Gideon caught her in an embrace she long remembered. It was not farewell, but appropriation. "Good-bye, Moppett," he whispered, "I'll come soon." Screened by the night, he startled her by his first lover's kiss, then helped her to the middle place on the box beside Alfred. Gideon's hands closed savagely; he longed to pitch Alfred into eternity.

Out into the desert gloom they went, Clotho, invisible, spinning, spinning her tangled web. And behind in a lonely station sat a hooded Fate, reading from her close-held book of life no words that comforted. For Stella was gone; and Gideon sat out the night fighting his first man's heartache.

CHAPTER III

ALFRED PROMISES ALLEGIANCE

ALFRED studied Governor Stanford's face keenly while the latter re-read Mr. Huntington's letter. It said in part:—"For three years I have closely observed this young man, and found him, I believe, peculiarly adapted to business of a delicate nature, for which we shall have growing need. He is older than he looks, and wiser than his age. His character does not altogether show in his face, and few would suspect such a slender youth of his capacity for the affairs you may require of him."

Alfred was gratified at what he saw in the Governor's eyes as he looked up from the letter.

"Young man, because of Mr. Huntington's strong letter we're going to trust you beyond your years. It will be a varied and difficult task. Do you think you will be equal to it?"

Alfred waited a little before replying. The interview had been searching,—the more trying since a third, the General Superintendent, was present. But Alfred had received as well as given pledges of fidelity; for the two men had of necessity disclosed the incredible straits their company had survived, the tremendous obstacles yet to be surmounted before the transmontane road could become a fact.

PROMISES ALLEGIANCE

"All that I can do, sir, is to promise my best effort, and ask you to try me."

"Can you take hectoring good-naturedly?" asked Mr. Crocker. "You can't go far on such a shape as you have, out West here; there's too much Harvard College and ball-room in it."

The Governor spoke at once. "I believe Vincent will safely weather remarks concerning his shape; he'll be in cities most of the time, anyway. Have you good health?" he continued, addressing Alfred. "You look a little—"

"I can endure as much as the ordinary man," Alfred returned, as the Governor hesitated. "Though I appear delicate, I am well; and I rely greatly on that appearance. Don't you think, sir, the more weakly and—green, you say, don't you?—the more green I look the less men will suspect me of secret business?"

"Yes," the Governor said musingly, pausing a moment before continuing. "It's not nice work we're putting you to, Vincent. You'll have to meet craft with craft, scheme with scheme. And some of Cadwallader's schemes—they're the schemes of the men behind him, yet they don't sweeten in his hands—are far from savory. But we'll not ask you to do anything for us that's less than honest."

"That's only safe, sir. You'd hardly trust me if I accepted other terms."

The Superintendent looked up suddenly, not altogether liking the ring of independence in Alfred's voice. Governor Stanford, however, was a student of men; and Alfred's terse, unobsequious reply

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fixed the liking already born in the railroad president's heart.

"Here's our cipher. Use it as sparingly as possible. No man can make a cipher some other man can't read."

"Unless he changes it often enough," Alfred added instantly.

The Governor smiled and turned to the Superintendent. "I guess he'll do, Crocker." His face relaxed, and Alfred caught a glimpse of the genial, hearty citizen who won men to his enterprises through his faith,—faith in both enterprises and men.

"Your first business will be to learn more of the railroad. I'll ask our secretary, Mr. Miller, to let you have immediate access to the records. You'd better take a run over the road. That will speak louder in a day than any other record could in a year."

"That's true," interjected the Superintendent with a look of pride. "We're pushing things all along the line. Lord! If Huntington can only get our time limit extended!"

"He will," returned Governor Stanford, the optimist, before he turned again to Alfred. "As soon as possible you'll go to San Francisco, get in touch with the McLane crowd, McCoppin, and our other enemies there, and learn what you can of their plans against us." He glanced at the Superintendent. "How can we wedge him in there the quickest, Crocker? It won't do for me to introduce him."

"I can fix that. The situation's right to my hand,

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and no smack of railroad in it, either. I'll send him to Harmon. No one knows that he's to work for us as soon as his term on the bench expires. Mrs. Harmon's the queen bee in society down there. She'll land the young man where we want him, first fling."

"Good enough. But we can't allow you much time in San Francisco, Vincent. You must work fast, mow as wide a swath as you need,—don't mind the dollars, be the Boston aristocrat,—and get through in time to cut in at Carson City. There's legislation pending in the 'Third House' of that baby legislature over there, that we need to know about."

Some further instructions ensued, and the conference ended. And Alfred was soon engrossed in minutes of directors' meetings, Supreme Court decisions, newspaper reports and comments, State and national legislation,—everything that would aid in making him master of the history of the road. He worked fast and thoroughly, inspired anew with enthusiasm for the great business to which he had promised allegiance.

Back of his ardor lay another spur, desire to see Stella. She was there, where he shortly would be, at the "Front." She had written him of her safe arrival, of Jake Bennett's kind protection, of Mrs. Bennett's loving care, and the invitation to remain with them. Stella had chosen rather independence, and had found work. Alfred chafed at thought of the rough labor and rougher surroundings he knew she must encounter; and the desire to see and judge for himself grew daily more insistent. Yet often as he recognized it, he chided himself; remembered that woman, even the

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thought of woman, had no place in his present life. He had neither name nor home; he must win both before he dared win a woman.

Yet—Stella! He lived over again the short, sun-blessed days, the long, frost-stinging nights they had swung westward together over the barren desert. He saw again the quivering eyelid, or the unsteady hand of each driver as Stella presented her pitiful proxy for a ticket, Uncle Billy's terse message,—“Pass along the bearer, Bill Anthony's daughter. Injuns got him! You and the Lord Almighty's got her. Look out for her.” Stella's story ran fast; and had her journey been the progress of a queen, drivers and station keepers could have done no more for her.

In those speeding hours hearts blossomed, if lips spoke not. Dreams then begun persisted, protesting against Alfred's stern determination to wake from them to the day's relentless work.

CHAPTER IV

THE WHIP OF THE BLAST

DEEP in a small gulch, the red earth bleeding through its torn mantle, crouched a raw little railroad town. Cabins, tents, huts, lean-tos propped against trees, scraps of shops, false-fronted stores, and "gin mills," huddled new and paintless between the claspings hills.

It was an hour before noon when a slender little engine, with spidery wheels and huge, over-topping smoke-stack, puffed into the rude shed that was hung up on the mountain-side above town and called by courtesy a depot.

A man paced the boards nervously, impatient at the sacrifice of time required to meet so indefinite a personage as a telegram-introduced "young man in our employ who wishes to see your work." The restless man was George Gregory, Superintendent of Construction, the human engine that executed the commands of the officers at Sacramento. He was thickset and powerful, yet had the surprising agility sometimes seen in heavy men. His face was ploughed with the furrows of rough weather, from without and within. Red hair bristled aggressively; lips, now a closed vise, could, if they so willed, win a child with their smile; and his nose, sharp-cut and tip-tilted, pointed danger for his adversary. But his blue, redeeming eyes—April eyes

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—smiled and clouded, danced and gloomed, pelted the wrongdoer with hailstones and lightnings, blessed the unfortunate with dews and sunbeams. He should have been Irish, but he was born in Maine.

It was the lightning look that met Alfred, though only a heat flash; for Alfred, unabashed, presented a letter from the Governor, a magic bit of paper that arrested even George Gregory's lurid thoughts at the sight of this "dandified ball-room cublet."

The atmosphere was decidedly clearer when the Superintendent looked up from the letter. "When will you be ready to go over the grading, Mr. Vincent? I'll have your horse sent any time you say after dinner."

"After dinner, sir? The train leaves at two o'clock, does n't it?"

"Yes; but you'll not go back to-day, will you?"

"Can't I get to the Front and back by two?"

"No, not to the Front; yet you can see nearly all of the completed grade if you start at once. You'll miss your dinner, though."

"I don't wish to incommode you, sir. Could not some other person conduct me? Dinner is unimportant. I must return to-day if possible."

A shade of approbation crept into the Superintendent's keen glance. "Very well, Mr. Vincent. I'll have your horse in ten minutes. You ride? Our stock is cantankerous at times."

"I ride a little; if not well enough, I'll have to walk."

"Plucky!" thought the older man, as he despatched a messenger for Alfred's horse, and employed the wait in sending telegrams to the Sacramento office.

THE WHIP OF THE BLAST

Meantime Alfred wrote a short note to Stella, explaining his haste, and telling her that he would be at the hotel for a moment before he left in the afternoon, if possible. He had slipped the note with a coin into the stable boy's hand, and was in the saddle, when the Superintendent came out of the hot little box that did duty as a telegraph office; and the two were quickly out on the grade. Pick and shovel, man and beast, powder and drill,—the startled mountains rang with sounds unknown before since Nature cast them from her laboring womb. Thousands of men and teams were breaking Nature's trust; wresting from her an unwilling submission.

"So this is the railroad Mr. McLane claims is standing on end and leading up to heaven instead of across the Sierras over Judah's route?" Alfred stopped his horse and looked back through the deep cut, across the deeper ravine where the bridge-builders were at work. "That spider-web looks wickedly frail," he added.

"It's strong enough to hold our fly till we meet our time limit. Plenty of time for stiffening up and filling in afterward. And Theodore T. Judah,"—the Superintendent's lips set straight,—"*he* tramped the Sierras for years; he gave his skill, his fortune, his life, to blaze this path east over the Sierras; and by heaven, we'll prove him right in spite of hell and McLane!"

Alfred admired the passionate loyalty of the man, though he laughed at his vehemence. The horses' hoof-beats were now ringing clear on bare granite. "Where do you get earth for your fills? The trees

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here don't seem to have root-hold against a summer zephyr."

"That's one of my small troubles. Sometimes we have to go half a mile afield for soil. And carts—they can't make 'em fast enough. I've got twenty-five hundred men and three hundred carts; but we'll have to double that at once if we make our fifty miles on time. And where under the canopy the men are to come from I can't see. Talk of bricks without straw! Pharaoh's job was easy compared to mine."

"They are n't having any flowery-bed-of-ease time down in Sacramento just now, sir."

"I know it. That Big Four built the road as far as New Castle on their private capital; and the State of California thanked them by hanging up their railroad there for two years."

"Why could n't they go on in spite of the State?" Alfred asked.

"How could they? The State bond business jailed in the Supreme Court; the San Francisco Supervisors playing hob with the city bonds; the opposition's spies at Washington, and God knows where not, vilifying the railroad, the route, the Company; no money, no men, no good will; even Stanford getting the unseeing eye from old friends; and all this with the time limit hanging over them like the sword at Belshazzar's feast;—why damn it, that plucky Four'd make old Hercules sick!"

They had pushed on as far as the finished grading, and were returning. From the story of the pierced mountains and from George Gregory, Alfred had



ALFRED STOPPED HIS HORSE AND LOOKED BACK THROUGH
THE DEEP CUT

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THE WHIP OF THE BLAST

proved Governor Stanford's prediction about the "record of the road." It had told him more than words or pages of written details.

Gregory looked at his watch, and up and down the line of the grading sharply. The noon hour had almost passed. "I guess you can find your way back alone. I'm needed here."

"Are n't you going back—going somewhere for dinner, Mr. Gregory?"

"No. I guess my stomach's as fast-proof as yours." Already his alert eye was elsewhere, and Alfred knew himself dismissed.

Far and near men and teams began to swing in on the line of work. Gangs of blue-coated Chinamen with pick and shovel renewed their long attack upon the reluctant earth. From a thousand tamping hammers a chain of echoes broke the primeval stillness; and the roar of the blast forever distenanted many a wild creature's home. Man was claiming his dominion over the earth, "over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."

The Superintendent snapped to his watch cover, regardless of the spring. "Blast that Simms! His gang's the last on duty again! Good-bye, Mr. Vincent. Come and look us over again," he called, and dashed off toward the offending foreman. As Alfred passed on the trail below, the Superintendent's far-audible ire followed him, a unique word panorama, expressible only in dashes and stars.

Muscle-sore, Alfred alighted from his steaming bronco at the depot only five minutes before two. No

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time for Stella unless he stayed over night. Should he do it? Indeed, ought he not to remain, to see with his own eyes how she was circumstanced in this rough town? He remembered his promise to Uncle Billy. Mr. Crocker himself had said Alfred could not get comfortably to the "Front" and back in a day. His answer to Mr. Crocker flashed back on his brain: "No man's comfort should count against railroad business." That decided him. To stay meant one day later in San Francisco, one day less to study a situation where any hour might be the hour of fate for the Central Pacific Railroad.

The fussy little engine was now facing west, waiting its message from the lever. Alfred stood near the coach steps, hoping for a word from Stella, wishing one moment that she would come to the station, glad the next for the delicacy that restrained her.

The signal sounded and the train was starting, when a barefooted boy came blowing round the rear car carrying a small package, and informed the conductor breathlessly that it was for "that dandy feller that went off this morning with the Boss."

"Here!" cried Alfred, reaching down as the boy ran alongside. Alfred caught the parcel and threw a coin to the bearer.

The train labored slowly up the grade and around the hill while Alfred untied his package. It was a neat luncheon; and wrapped in the folded napkin was a spray of wild forget-me-not. From Stella! Impulsively he lifted the blossom to his face, and in the action caught the flutter of a woman's gown high on a

THE WHIP OF THE BLAST

hill that over-topped the track. There stood Stella, a granite boulder for her lookout, behind her a shining laurel. Her hat hung by its ribbons, her cheeks were glowing from her hurried climb; and the wind fluttered her full skirts, and tossed her shining hair.

She waved her handkerchief as the train passed, and Alfred caught the wistfulness back of her smile. How beautiful she was! More beautiful than he had thought her. He must see her! He would stay—jump—the train was only creeping—Boom! boom! The roar of the blast rang clear above the roar of the train. One more reach up the steeps for the iron track. Boom! boom! again. No time for love or delaying! The train swept on. Stella had vanished.

CHAPTER V

THE COMING OF UNCLE BILLY

DOWN the rain-soaked street of the railroad village hastened an alert youth carrying a yellow paper. Where all was hurry, one flying figure more or less would not have been noticed; but this one carried a crutch: one foot was turned backward and hung high above the ground. Yet one forgot to be sorry for the cripple, so quick was he, so shining with good nature. Every one called him "boy," though he was twenty.

"Hello, Al! What's yo' hurry?" asked a bystander. "You can do mo' with a stick an' a foot than most folks with two good laigs."

"Aw, spare my blushes, Mr. Bennett! Say, is the Old Man in the hotel?"

"Yes. Cain't yo' all let him swalleh his dinneh in peace? He don't need but five minutes; an' it ain't often he gits a lick at Sally B.'s chicken fixin's. He would n't to-day if that thar ornery train wa'n't two hours late."

"Well, this despatch'll help his digestion."

"Thought yo' all wa'n't 'lowed to read the yalleh lightnin'."

"I didn't read it. And—I ain't giving it away. Sabe?"

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The boy barely halted, and was at the dining-room door when Gregory came out.

"What's the racket, Al?" he said. "A message for me?" He spoke a little thickly, his mouth full of a fast disappearing apple.

The message was brief; and his comment was an explosion of oaths. Yet the boy grinned. It was glad profanity.

"Do you know what's in this, Al?"

"Yes, sir; I could n't help it."

"How's that?"

"I've learned the telegraph since I've been messenger."

"The hell you say! What's your speed?"

"I get most of the press despatches, sir."

"How about sending?"

"Not so good, sir; but I'll soon catch up if—" He stopped abruptly.

"If what?"

"I'd rather not say, sir."

"On account of the operator?"

"He's an O.K. friend to me, sir."

"H'm!" The Superintendent mounted and was in full gallop toward the station before he was quite seated. "I shan't forget you, boy," he called back over his shoulder.

Jake Bennett and Alvin Carter walked to the station together.

"It's odd you ain't on the grade with your gang, Mr. Bennett," the boy said after they had gone some way in silence.

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"The Boss give me a row to hoe down yer. I'm waitin' the snap of his whip an'—that consarned late train."

"How is it he never goes for you like he does the rest?"

"I reckon he knows I keep up my best lick all the time. Agin, thar's a leetle mule in me; I stand the whip some, but when I do kick somethin' busts."

They arrived at the station just as the train pulled in.

The first passenger through the car door was Uncle Billy.

"Why, durn my eyes! What 're yo' all doin' hyah, Bill Dodge?" asked Bennett as Uncle Billy stepped to the platform.

The two shook hands, but Bennett turned away with a hurried word, and disappeared within the station.

Uncle Billy gazed blankly toward the office, his face clouding with a disappointment that did not lift while he attended to his scant baggage.

The Superintendent came out shortly, giving hasty orders to Bennett as the two walked toward the big roan known as the "Boss's Lightning Striker." They passed Uncle Billy; but Bennett's face was a mask till the roan clattered out of sight, when he turned back, another soul looking from his eyes.

"How air yo' pegs fo' walkin', you ole bronco buster?" Bennett questioned in a hearty voice, slapping his heavy hand on Uncle Billy's shoulder. "How air ye any way, you blankety blank, gol durned ole son of a gun?"

COMING OF UNCLE BILLY

"That's good, Jake! I've been waiting for you to speak to me affectionately, like you used to. I tell you it hurts to get the glassy eye from you, Jake, when we were both raised in the same town back in Missouri." Uncle Billy flung back an answering caress, yet the small, sinewy hand struck a lighter blow than he had received.

"Don't yo' all eveh see any glassy eye I weah. It's only when I'm right shassayin' with the Boss that I don't see nobody else. Come on out on the grade with me, cain't ye? I got a lot o' hell's best in my gang, an' I'll have ter scoot back. They need one o' the Devil's own to watch 'em; reckon I'm the felleh."

They set off briskly and in single file up the steep cut-off that made in one mile the elevation of five miles of grading.

"What kin I do for yo' all, you rotary-eyed ole coon?" Bennett asked with another bear cuff as they came abreast.

"I want a job on Charley Crockeh's Dutch Flat stage line. Can I get it?"

"You bet yo' bottom dollah! They need men like you. Just chuck yo' application to Crockeh, and—no. Go right to Spalding; he's boss of the Company's new stage line. But what's yo' all's grouch agin the Old Man?"

"Haven't any in particulah. There's a little gal oveh hyah, Bill Anthony's daughter—"

"Shore. We tuck her in fur yo' sake; kep' her fo' her own. The ole woman's dead stuck on her; wanted her to stay right along, but she would n't."

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"That's her, all right. You remember Bill Anthony?"

"Reckon I do. He's that gold-plated ole cuss that built a sort o' suburb to the Golden City over thar in Washoe, ain't he?"

"Same. But the Injuns got him; an' the girl has no relations that she knows of; so I sent her oveh yah to you. I want to be neah her, and—"

Bennett's nudge sent Uncle Billy off the trail. "You ole Mormon! Ain't thinkin' o' marryin' her yo'self, are ye?"

"Well, by jiminy! I'm not that kind of a sardine. She's eighteen maybe, and I'm squinting at my fiftieth birthday. If I'd had a daughteh, an' she was like Stella Anthony, the Prince o' Wales would n't be good enough for her. See where I'm driving?"

"Pesky well. Yo're O.K., Bill."

"She's as good a girl as God Almighty eveh set in hoops! And I want to keep an eye on her, an' a dollah in her pocketbook—if she'll let me."

"She's powerful proud."

"Yes, the right sort. Does a white-looking young felleh by the name of Vincent hang round her any?"

"No such man in these diggins. Who's he?"

"I don't know,—that's the trouble. He was a passengeh on the trip when we found Anthony's raided, and I sent the girl back in his charge. He was a likely acting Eastern chap, his ambition biggeh than his weight; just the sort to catch the eye of a girl like Stella. I want to camp on his trail till I've prospected him plumb to bed rock."

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"None o' that kind round hyah. She gits a few letters—p'rhaps they 're from him. But the man you want to keep yo' eye skinned on's Gid Ingram, Bernard's bar-keep. He's dead gone on her."

"That fugacious flapdoodle slinging whiskey?—and looking at Stella?" Uncle Billy's eyes flashed red for an instant, but settled quickly to their usual mild twinkle. "Oh, I reckon he's no harm. He's grown up with Stella; was Anthony's Man Friday; took care of Stella as faithful as a collie. But, by Jupiteh, he's got to shuck that business or quit recognizing her!"

"I'd say shuck the town, if I had charge of the gal. I don't like them Injun eyes o' his'n."

"Gid's betteh than his eyes," Uncle Billy replied with half breath.

The sun had vanquished the clouds, and the air was still and warm.

"By George! I wish my legs were as good as my arms."

"Blowed, are ye? Well, we'll be thar in a minute."

They came suddenly to the pick-torn engine path where Bennett's gang were spiking the "chairs" over the flanges of the rails to the ties. Instantly banter and familiarity vanished, and Jake Bennett became the quiet, lynx-eyed overseer. They had surprised the men working well under the temporary foreman; yet Uncle Billy saw a sweep of fresh energy speed down the line, as the under man took up his hammer, and Bennett swiftly examined the work done in his absence. He spoke scarcely a word; but his "straight" eye saw

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every poor joint, each badly set "chair"; and his own hands often assisted in the readjusting.

When he returned to the end of the section where Uncle Billy was waiting he said, "The Boss has powerful good news to-day. That despatch was a copy of one the Governor got from Huntington at Washington. The Railroad Bill's passed, an' the C. P. Company's got anotheh yeah on the fust fifty mile, an' right smart mo' land besides."

"Great Cæsah! That's good news!"

"Yes, Bill. That thar's news to pass along. Men works betteh on a winnin' deal; only we bosses cain't talk. Hyah's where yo' all can come in,—just from the city, seen the Governor, heard the news. Sabe?"

"Certain. I'm yo' huckleberry! I'll blow the word as fah as Jericho," returned the driver cordially.

"Come to our shanty afteh work. The ole woman'll be powerful glad to see ye. Oh! Tie up at Sally B.'s. She's right smart peppery, but she'll give ye lallapin' good truck; an' if she takes a shine to ye, yo' own motheh could n't do mo' fo' you. Stella's thar, too."

Uncle Billy's face sprang from December to May; and he turned quickly to the rocky trail that led back to town.

Stella! The lonely man sped down the red, muddy trail, his fatigue banished by the magic of her name! He looked up through the overarching fretwork of pine and cedar to heaven's blue beyond, and the poet stirred in his heart, wakened by the memory of her face. Winter-blue skies, the thin, fragrant air,

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whispering pines, even the red, warm face of the uprearing mountain, all had a secret word for him to-day. Would she love him still? Or had new scenes, new faces, filled her life, left no small chamber in her heart labelled, "Uncle Billy"?

A tiny white cloud puffed out of a cleft in the rock wall across the ravine, and hung, spirit-like, high in the air. Uncle Billy saw it, and held his breath, waiting for the detonations that proclaimed the blast. Before the reverberations had ceased he knew something was wrong. Men appeared looking as little as babies on the far precipice. They were running wildly, one or two limping.

"My God! Some one's hurt bad," Uncle Billy whispered to himself, as he saw two come forth from the black hole bearing a third, whom they laid gently down.

"Passed in his checks, po' felleh!" the watcher murmured as he saw men gather about, making no movement of help, but bending reverently with bared heads over the still form.

A premature explosion! Another added to the list of martyrs! Another human life paid in on Nature's indemnity claim. Uncle Billy recalled grim scenes of the desert; and from some dim memory crypt flashed forth words his mother had taught him at her knee: "He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down; he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not."

Uncle Billy walked slowly back to town.

CHAPTER VI

THE GENIUS OF BERNARD'S

A NARROW planed and painted strip on the largest false front in town announced "Bernard's Hotel." The personality indicated by the name "Bernard" was a miner, an incurable, always wandering in the silent mountains, always just going to "strike it rich." But Sally Bernard, his wife, was equal to her "lone hand," and scrupulously faithful to her husband's interests. For her mother and her daughter Viola she made a home, happy if rude; for her husband she made dollars that he dropped into his prospecting holes.

The hotel was the most imposing structure in the town, and aggressively new; nail heads had not yet rusted the yellow boards. The odor of pitch met the guest before his entrance, and continued with him, a warning he wisely heeded by keeping away from all partitions. Doors and windows stood open to patrons and flies alike, for the temperature spoke of summer, though the calendar said winter. The quiet of the afternoon, when the entire town rested from the noise and haste of railroad concerns, was broken only by the high, nasal song of Yic Wah, the cook, and the rhythmic beat of his egg whip.

Sally Bernard was known from Sacramento to Virginia City as Sally B., and it was in her motherly heart

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and home that Stella Anthony, orphaned and kinless, found her niche and her work.

"Why, Mrs. Bernard, you've only known me a few weeks. I'm not wise enough to be Viola's teacher."

They were sitting in Grandma'am's room, which was family bedroom, sitting-room, and parlor, a conglomerate of furniture, color, and uses, that none but a three-generations-bred frontier woman could have evolved. The floor was covered with burlap grain-bags, sewed together and overlaid with bear and buffalo skins. An alleged couch would have disclosed to inquisitive eyes, peering under bear skin and cambric valance, a cotton-topped, hay mattress, unplanned legs, and a capacious drawer, all Sally B.'s own work. Two cane rocking-chairs, a stove, a sewing-machine, and a mirror were the only visible shop-sold furnishings. Barrel rockers, rawhide chairs, "crickets," curtains, wall-cupboards,—the same busy hands had made them all. The walls were lined with pictorial papers; and Grandma'am treasured their delights, hung over them, talked of them, as a modern connoisseur talks of his old masters.

A wide shelf high above the floor extended the length of the longest wall. Under this two rough bed-frames were hooked up, again Sally B.'s work; though the mattresses were the best that money could buy. Beside them were home-made dressing-cases, a washstand with a pail for a pitcher, a gourd for a dipper, and a shining brass basin. Nails adroitly disposed utilized every angle for hanging clothes. This perpendicular boudoir, which became lateral and

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practical at night, was screened by a calico curtain. Such a curtain! What daring designer had perpetrated it, an inconceivable atrocity of color and figure? And how had the mysterious law of demand and supply presented it to the eyes of the only possible white woman buyer in the State of California? In the otherwise quiet room the table cover only could claim distant kinship to the curtain; and the two ruled the room ferociously.

Stella gave Sally B. no time to reply, but went on firmly: "You need a capable governess for her, one who can prepare her to meet life. Of that I am as ignorant as a little child. I'm quite satisfied with the dining-room work, Mrs. Bernard."

"Don't 'Mrs.' me; I ain't used to it. As for knowledge, you know a heap sight more 'n Viola; an' any way, I want her to be with you. I might hire a herd of governesses, an' not git the right kind. There's more 'n arithmetic an' fancy readin' a girl will learn from her teacher." Sally B. plied her machine vigorously, rolling off hemmed sheets and pillow cases into a high, white pile.

Stella's voice was grateful. "But Mrs.—but—"

"Call me Sally B., like the rest does."

"No, I'll call you Mrs. Sally. I shan't earn my living, Mrs. Sally."

Sally B.'s black eyes snapped. "If you don't, you'll be the first that ever took Sally B.'s money without givin' value received."

Stella smiled. She had already seen that there was no nook in Sally B.'s house where shirkers could hide;

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yet if one were ill or unfortunate, no other good Samaritan than Sally B.'s self was needed.

"I'll send to Auburn an' git the same books they use in the schools there. You can put Vi through from nine to twelve, help me in the dinin'-room on busy days, an' keep school agin from two to four. Here in Grandma'am's room can be the place. An' I'll double your wages. How'll that suit?"

"It's not a question of how it will suit me; it's all on my side. Let me make the beds and sweep Saturdays, and it will be nearer fair."

"Sweep? Have Viola's teacher sweep? No, siree! An' I would n't let you go in that corral for six bits a minute!"

Viola entered, small, childish in figure, old of face, yet lovely in coloring. Between her dark mother and grandmother, the latter the bent, weazened original of her daughter, the fair, hazel-eyed child seemed of another race. As foreign to them, too, were her air of delicate refinement, her soft voice, and her gentle movements, inheritances from a father bred out of his proper environment. She held wild buttercups and violets, which she carried to her grandmother.

The old face flooded with a sudden glory. She took the flowers in both hands, gently pressed them to lip and cheek, drew long whiffs of their fragrance, turned them from side to side, peered questioningly into their sun-filled hearts,—it was pitiful the ecstasy a flower could bring to this shut-in soul.

"Where'd you git 'em, honey?" she asked in the thick voice of the deaf.

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Instantly Viola caught up her grandmother's crutch, bent back her foot, and, for a step or two, imitated Alvin Carter.

"The telegrafer's boy?" the old woman asked, with an odd light in her eye.

Viola nodded.

"Here they be, child. You must n't give away yer sweetheart's posy gift."

Viola's cheek tint deepened; but she laughed, pushing back the old hand that offered the blossoms.

"Git a tumbler of water, Vi, so's they won't wilt," her mother commanded.

As soon as Viola vanished, Sally B. began the most remarkable gesture speech Stella had ever seen. It was meaningless to her, yet the old dame evidently understood it.

"No sweethearts? That pretty gal?" The old eyes gleamed young again.

Another series of gyrations.

"Too young ter marry? She's older'n you was; though I do 'low she's powerful little."

Sally B.'s movements were more emphatic.

"Sho, Sally; she must n't marry that leetle cripple, to be shore. But where there's honey there'll be more'n one fly; and all fellers is sweethearts at fifteen."

Viola came in with the water, and pushed up a "lightstand," leaving Grandma'am with her flowers.

"Do tell me, Mrs. Sally, how you make her understand. It's wonderful!"

"Yes; folks thinks it's right peart. Poor Grandma'am, she can't read!" Sally B. paused and gazed

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sorrowfully at the old woman. "They wa'n't no chance o' learnin' to read in Oregon in the twenties. So when she got stun deaf I was pesky cut up. It came after Paw died. I laid awake o' nights studyin' how I could talk with her like the deaf an' dumb does. One day she asked me how Bill—that's my husband—come by a scar on his hand; an' I drew a picture of a horse kickin' a man."

"I wish you 'd seen Grandma'am's face," Viola broke in. "It was just like to-day with the flowers."

"After that I pictured out things whenever I could git the time,—rough o' course; I can't draw none,—but sort of one-line things she'd see the meanin' of. Bime-by they got so many it took a heap o' time to hunt 'em over, an' I hit on the idee of puttin' numbers on 'em. She larned the numbers; an' now when we want to tell her anything we just call off the figgers on our fingers. One wave of both hands is ten, two waves is twenty, an' so on; an' the one, two, threes we do with our fingers."

"How astonishing! May I see your picture alphabet?" Stella asked.

"Certain." Sally B. brought out the crude drawings. "Of course, all the easy things, sech as eatin', sleepin', laughin', cryin', we just act out." The lighting panorama on Sally B.'s face showed that her mother had some things to be thankful for.

"Stella, you 'make Viola read them kind o' books you have read, an' understand 'em, too, if ye have to break her head a-doin' it. Think o' Maw just a settin' there, piecin' Risin' Sun quilts, an' Settin' Moon

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quilts, an' Bridal Wreath quilts,—same ole patterns over 'n over agin. Good Lord! One Risin' Sun's 'nough for the hull airth, ain't it? Well, she's made a dozen,—makes 'em for me, too, God love her! Jest think what her life 'd be if she could read!" Sally B. almost sobbed the last word.

"Ma 'd take in washing at a bit a piece to buy books for Grandma'am if she could read."

"Wuss 'n that, Vi; I 'd do a heap wuss things than that to git books for her."

"Worse than that, Ma?"

"Look at your ole Grandma'am, Vi!" Sally B. returned passionately. "If I was like that, yet could read, is there many things so bad ye would n't do 'em, if ye could n't git me books without?"

Sally B. was standing now. Viola threw her arms around her tall mother and looked up in her quivering face. "I reckon not, Ma."

The words were meagre; yet Stella looked into Viola's love-haloed face and knew that Sally B. had given into her keeping a beautiful soul.

A shadow fell across the door-sill, and Yic Wah appeared. "No, spuds, no licey, no salelatus fo' sup-peh. You catchee him quick."

Sally B. whirled, her eyes blazing. "Gosh dang it, Yic! Why you no tellee me last week?"

"You callee me Yic Wah. Sabe?" The Chinaman's voice was as placid as a pond in July. He turned without another look at the group and left the room.

"May I go to the store for you?" Stella asked.

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"No. There's two reasons: one, I can't have Vi's teacher doin' common errands; the other, that Gid'll be leavin' his work an' runnin' after you." She parted the drapery at the back of a barrel chair and drew her hat and jacket from under the seat. Though it was warm Sally B. dressed for business as carefully as she played every other part in life.

"I'll have to give Gideon some lessons, too, I think," Stella said half aside.

"You've give him too many already. Say, Stella, I'm right sorry I tuck him on at the bar. He's goin' to make trouble for ye, 'specially if ye git partial to any other feller. I think—"

"Some fellee likee see Missee Stella," interrupted Yic Wah, poking his yellow face through the doorway. "Stlange man—me no sabe."

Stella followed him into the narrow hall and out on the porch.

"Oh, Uncle Billy! I'm so glad!"

It was almost as if her father stood before her. She threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him on each cheek.

The old driver was speechless with delight. If he could only have been her father! Yet this was the next best thing. She loved him! She had kissed him!

Stella drew him into the hall, looked him up and down, patted his hand, took off his hat, and peered into his face, trying to see if he was quite well, the same Uncle Billy she had known so long, ever since that wonderful journey across the mountains, when

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she had sat by his side, in black sandals, white stockings, pantalettes, and a leghorn hat with a bridle. What pride she had taken in that bridle!

At last he found his voice. "Well, durn my eyes, if you have n't grown tall, you pretty little snipe, you! Here! I got a bonnet for ye."

He went to the door, picked up a small band-box, and brought it to her.

Stella opened it. Within was a scrap of scarlet silk and lace for which some milliner had swindled Uncle Billy out of forty dollars. Stella's best gown was bright magenta, Gideon's gift. She would have to wear them both, and together!

CHAPTER VII

A PEEP INTO PARADISE

IN SAN FRANCISCO after three years of exile Alfred found a home. Judge Harmon made him welcome as a son; and Alfred did not stay long enough to discover that other young men shared with him the Judge's fatherly attitude.

Mrs. Harmon was a child-hungry woman, no longer young in years, though her heart would never forget twenty-five. To this lover of children came none save those that blessed other mothers. Yet her loss proved gain to many a homeless youth and maiden; for she wasted no soul energy in selfish repining, but poured out her wealth of purse and heart on every wandering youngling that came unmothered within the sphere of her life.

A favorite, a social authority and leader, she launched Alfred immediately and successfully among the people he most needed to meet. Posing as a Boston sight-seer, he was accepted with a hospitality known only in Kentucky and in old San Francisco; and he found no lack of alluring eyes and smiles, albeit every woman was a belle. His business-like manner and familiarity with names to conjure with in Boston's financial world won men; his polish, his music, still more, a certain deferential aloofness that contrasted sharply with the eager competition of the men about him, won women.

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Society, fast and feverish, curious, fascinating, opulent, was the speediest vehicle by which he could arrive at his purpose; for society in San Francisco was still too new to divorce itself from the golden enterprises that made it. His success astonished himself. Men whose intentions he expected to learn through patient acumen talked openly of their affairs with the railroad men. Even women made of the Central Pacific Railroad and its projectors a continuous joke. Alfred wondered. He could not then, as afterwards, realize that, to every thorough-going San Franciscan, California was but a storehouse, a kitchen garden, at most a tribute-bringing suburb of the gay city by the Golden Gate. Nothing outside mattered. To them the sand-duned cusp, straggled over with its flimsy, gibbous houses, was as truly the whole world as ever was the Eternal City to old Roman.

So secrets fell unearned into Alfred's keeping. Red lips told him tales between their smiles, every word a prize. Business men, talking glibly of inland transportation, dismissed the transmontane railroad with a yawn, yet went wild over the delusion of San Joaquin valley petroleum. And Alfred drove, sang, dined, danced merrily to his goal; and bade good-bye to his entertainers the very day he read Phineas Cadwalader's name on the Lick House register.

Still, back of all this blare of social trumpets Stella reigned serenely upon a sacred throne, whose golden curtains no profane hand dared lift. Alfred himself had not looked full upon that royal countenance, did not know the extent of her realm nor the power of

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her sovereignty. She stood to him somewhat as the queen to her loyal soldier, not fully known, yet fully believed in; not often seen, yet always and in truth ever present; always to be trusted, always to be defended, though ever defending. Temptations, gross and subtle, pressed upon Alfred with the fierce force of the hottest blood of that hot-blooded city, only to find him impregnable. A pair of wistful brown eyes, a glowing face brushed across by wind-tossed locks,—these encompassed him with the moat of their purity, watched from the barbican of their modesty.

He reported in Sacramento, received instructions, and incidentally commendation. Hastily he made the changes called for by the step from jasmine-hung San Francisco to ice-bound Carson City. And the second day after leaving salt water, he swung into Sally B.'s to find Stella away, across the gulch, watching in the house of mourning.

All the way from Sacramento, while the little steam bantam bumped over the unsettled road-bed, Alfred had rehearsed his expected interview with Stella. He did not admit his love; he had no right to it. Friendly interest, the duty of courtesy to one so forlorn and so placed in his care,—those were all. His own eyes must prove the truth of her letters, which told scanty of her good health and fair situation. He would sit by her side the short hour before the stage left, hear in detail her life in California. She should do the talking, and he would be quiet and fatherly,—his eight more years of life entitled him to the paternal attitude. And it should be paternal. She

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must not love him. That he must guard against. Love him? He laughed at his own conceit. Surrounded by scores of men, some of them her equals and more in position and education, almost the only unmarried woman in the town, and beautiful! Probably she had already capitulated. He had learned that love developed rapidly out West. Yet—yet—Stella was different. And the wistful brown eyes on the hillside!

Sally B. saw his disappointment, and came quickly to his rescue. "Go with my Viola here; she'll show ye. You can make the house across the gulch in fifteen minutes. Mr. Sacket was killed by a blast the other day, you know; an' Stella's ben with the widder sence. But Vi'll stay with her, an' you 'n Stella can talk a heap in a half-hour. Walk this way, an' slow; an' ye'll still have a quarter-hour fur yer dinner 'fore the stage leaves. Billy Dodge pulls out to-day; he'll give ye an extra minute or two."

Alfred flushed at Sally B.'s loud plans. He had found instant favor in her eyes. His obvious superiority to the men that swarmed, unwelcome, about Stella at every opportunity, decided Sally B. to aid him with Stella. The sooner they settled things the better it would be for her.

But she had no conception of the complexities of Alfred's nature and rearing. She could not have comprehended, had he explained it, his sentiment for Stella, did not dream of the cause of his flush of annoyance as he left her,—an annoyance that lasted, and made him a silent companion in the quick walk.

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Would every one thus construe this visit of courtesy? he asked himself. Would Stella? If so, how would she meet him? What would she think of his intended attitude? Would she be disappointed, unhappy? And what would Uncle Billy say? Alfred's excited imagination prefigured the driver's winged wrath for any one who should cause his darling one instant of heartache. Yet he could not marry her; he must not offer her, or any woman, other than the name of his father, the name he had no right to use. The flush deepened to a dull red; and Viola, glancing shyly at his angry eyes, registered against him a conclusion he might have needed to reckon with, had not the vision of Stella in the doorway banished gloom, and evoked a smile that the child was quite old enough to read and glory in.

Breathless, Viola explained her coming with such bald candor that Stella went forth dumb with embarrassment. She had lived hard the past few weeks; Alfred realized it at once. The panoramic village life, the moil and tyranny of the railroad, and now, the tragedy that lurked unburied behind her,—these had carried her years beyond those sorrowful yet lotus-dreamy days on the desert. To be sure, the dream yet lingered, was the deepest and best thing in her life. This she had not fully understood, though she reluctantly acknowledged to herself that to dream of Alfred was better than to be with any other.

But now she was tongue-tied. The constraint born of separation was upon her. Intuition read to her a little of the record of Alfred's experiences; of his

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different and engrossing cares. Also, the impact of lives and experiences surrounding her had created an incomprehensible atmosphere through which she saw Alfred as through a veil, a different Alfred.

He felt her diffidence and construed it as kind indifference. She did not love him; she wished him to recognize the absurd situation Viola had thrust upon them, yet she was too gentle to hurt him with speech. How dear and lovely she was! More lovely than ever. And how gracious! How modest! After the breathless days in San Francisco, how dignified and restful! And if she did not love him she was safe! He might gaze upon her, admire her, love her; without harm to her, might keep her image hidden in his heart. Was this the way of torture for him? So be it. Better such torture for her sake than the smiles of any other.

And thus the fleet minutes waned while these two dumbly sought each other, like lovers at a *bal masqué*, clasping hands, yet sundered by a domino.

They came down the path to town and mounted the high, uneven sidewalk. Uncle Billy had just dashed up to the express office, the curvetting six under the spur of his mysterious skill still showing off proudly to the admiring bystanders. Gideon was in the bar-room doorway, his glowering eyes fixed on the approaching pair. Alfred discerned the hate in Gideon's surly greeting, saw the loutish leers and nudges of the loungers, Stella's burning cheeks; he even mistook the satisfaction in Uncle Billy's hearty urging.

"Get outside of yo' dinneh at a two-forty gait,

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Vincent. The Ovehland cain't wait, and Uncle Billy cain't miss yo' company. Sabe?"

Alfred set his teeth. He would stay over. He would have a long evening with Stella, would learn her heart, warn her of the danger that lurked behind Gideon's dark brow. Alfred told himself that he must arrange to take her from this intolerable place, to guard her from these daily annoyances. He must—even in that hurried moment Alfred knew it was his own heart crying, his own love that had leaped to flame-heat in one short hour of her sunlight.

At the dining-room door Stella paused and held out her hand.

"No; it's not good-bye," Alfred said, though he took her hand. "I shall stay over, shall see you to-night,—and—"

"Hello, Vincent! You're the very man I wanted to see. Had your dinner?" Superintendent Crocker breezed out of the dining-room, his eyes giving sincere admiration to Stella, his voice a hearty welcome to Alfred.

"No, sir," Alfred answered hesitatingly. "I—"

"Eat quick, then. Billy Dodge don't wait for passengers, important or otherwise. The greatest luck this. I expected a dull trip over,—always excepting the driver." He waved a smiling apology to Uncle Billy and climbed to the seat beside him.

Alfred felt his body grow leaden; and he startled Stella with his strained voice.

"Very well, Mr. Crocker; I'll be with you in a minute."

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He turned to Stella. There was something in her unguarded face that set his every nerve atingle; that elated yet maddened him. Still, he must hold himself in check, must not lose a second; most of all, he must not let her know what he had learned. "Yes, it must be good-bye, after all, you see," he said tensely. "I'll be back soon; we'll have a talk then."

Did she see his eyes exult, hear his heart beat? She surely must have seen! He was so selfish in his own joy, so hurried that he did not catch the quiver in her drooped lids, did not know that his controlled tones and commonplace words told Stella nothing of the ecstasy that was ringing in his ears, singing in his heart

He made a snatch at dinner for looks' sake, and mounted beside the Superintendent; while onlookers passed bets as to whether Alfred was a Company employee, or a "big bug with a pocketbook Charley Crocker was trying to hook."

And Stella behind the window curtain with blurring eyes watched the stage whirl away into the dark pines.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CLOVEN FOOT

STELLA shivered apprehensively when Phineas walked into the dining-room a few days after Alfred's departure, and crowded past the diners to take the only vacant seat at her table. Travel had grown heavier, and Stella assisted regularly now with the noon waiting. She shrank at Phineas's loud, familiar greeting, helplessly resenting the inquiring looks of the other guests. Yet the thrill of fear was not for herself but for Alfred. Phineas must be on his way to Carson City; Alfred was there! More than mere womanly apprehensiveness prompted her anxiety. Alfred was in the secret employ of the Central Pacific Railroad Company; Phineas was that Company's enemy, and he would surely find Alfred out.

Phineas indorsed her fear by discharging a bomb that startled more than Stella. "California is sure of her transmontane railroad now! The San Francisco and Washoe Railroad Company has been organized with ten millions of capital behind it; and ten millions more it will get from the Government, besides a whopping big land grant. The road goes by Placerville. It has staked out the backing of the baby State of Nevada, and already begun business. Oh, we fellows ain't asleep over Placerville way, you bet not! We'll

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make those C. P. slubberdegullions cough up their boot-heels yet!"

His loud words carried to all, and silenced the room for a pregnant instant. Even the clatter of iron cutlery was suspended. When a subdued hum did begin, dismay was in each face and voice. The success of this new scheme meant failure for the Central Pacific Company; and in that locality the Central Pacific Railroad was mother to every enterprise, bread to every mouth.

As soon as she could, Stella wrote hastily to Alfred, telling him of the coming of Phineas and his astounding news. She asked Sally B. to hand the letter to the driver as a special commission, and set out through the back door for a walk before lesson time, hoping so to recover tranquillity.

She took the little path skirting a winter rivulet back of the town; and came soon to a clump of pines a little way up the sunny hillside. She was quite in view from the short street, until hidden by a thicket of laurel and holly hugging close about the taller pines. Though a scant half-mile from the hotel, the small nook was away from all paths, and had proved a safe retreat, unfrequented by any save the two girls. Here they sometimes came for the afternoon lessons. Wrapped about with the warm, moist breath of Earth, keyed to her still measures, Stella came very near to Viola. Children both, the younger girl exchanged much of her rough, worldly wisdom for the deeper, truer insight begotten of Stella's lonely, nature-taught life.

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To-day Stella's grateful solitude was short-lived. Quick steps had followed hers; the twigs parted, and Phineas stood before her.

Phineas was in his own estimation a "lady-killer." No nicety of dress or jewelry appeared without finding him an early purchaser. If one analyzed his face feature by feature, little fault could be found. By all the canons he was in face and form Apollosque. Yet reading beneath the skin, one saw but the spell of the snarer in the flashing eye, in his indefinable craftiness.

Stella's intuition was unerring, but her caution was untrained. She did not attempt to conceal her opinion of him. "Mr. Cadwallader!" she cried, starting up. "I thought you went away by the stage."

Even Phineas was abashed by the evident dismissal in her attitude. Yet he was piqued, and determined on conquest; and also to make that serve another purpose. He ignored her manner and set himself the task of interesting her, never doubting his success.

"I did n't, you see. I'm here instead." He bowed deferentially. "How could I go without a word with you, the belle of the village? Won't you sit down again?" He waved his hand toward the rock from which she had risen, but kept his place near the entrance.

All that was womanly in Stella went on guard; yet she had neither the finesse of the artful nor the maxims of Mrs. Grundy. She could only grope blindly between native courtesy and intuition.

"Thank you, Mr. Cadwallader. Please excuse

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me; I must hurry back." She took a step forward, but he did not offer to give her egress.

"What's your hurry, Miss Stella? You are a lovely dryad here at your shrine, and pretty girls, to say nothing of dryads, are too few in my busy life. You surely won't be so cruel as to leave me without a word?"

His manner was as respectful as he could make it. Still, Stella knew he made conquests merely to brag of them. "It's time for Miss Viola's lessons, and I must go," she said with decision.

He did not move. "Vi's lessons don't begin till two; Sally B. said so. It's one-fifteen now; time enough for a little talk, is n't there? I've something important to say to you." Phineas gazed at her boldly, expecting to see a flush of apprehensive color sweep her face. Her calmness only spurred him the more.

Stella's modesty had attributed another motive than admiration to his coming, though she could not guess it. She was silent, thoughtful. What course should she take? She must do nothing that could add to his enmity for Alfred. Her eyes were fixed on the opposite hillcrest, and she lifted her hand thoughtlessly to her hair while searching for an excuse to go that would be effective. The motion freed a handkerchief tucked in her belt, and it fluttered to the ground unseen by her.

Phineas furtively reached for it, examined it, noted the embroidered "Stella" in the corner, and thrust it in his pocket. "Yes, look to your hair, California

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Berenice ; it is quite brilliant enough to make stars of," he said impressively.

"Mr. Cadwallader, I cannot accept nor parry your extravagant compliments as a city girl would. Surely you can't be interested in the simple things I can say. Please let me go." Once again she moved as if to pass him.

"A beautiful woman does n't need to say things to be interesting. You have n't asked what it is I wished to say."

"Did you expect me to ask?"

"Most girls would. That's where you are the more attractive. Sit down here, and we'll talk it over. I'll make you comfortable." He reached for some of the overhanging boughs, intending to place them on the rock seat. The movement took him a pace from the opening.

"Really, Mr. Cadwallader, I'm sure you could tell me as well at the hotel. Good afternoon." She started toward the low, thorny opening.

He was after her with the spring of a cat. "No, you don't, my beauty! If you won't stay and talk, you shall give me a proper farewell."

The inequality of the ground availed him ; and before she could divine his intention he threw his arm around her, gave her an audible kiss, and stepped back out of her reach. "There, my wood-nymph, don't break your heart ; and don't think I was intending to ask you to marry me. I only wanted to tell that inflated skipjack, Vincent, that his modest dove was n't above a sweet little flirtation with your humble servant. I have your handkerchief, and —"

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His sneering words ceased suddenly, not for the menace in Stella's pale face, but for hasty, approaching strides. He sprang forward past Stella to meet Gideon's crashing blow.

"Hand Stella her handkerchief, you devil's whelp!" Gideon hastened the prostrate man with a kick.

Phineas rose with difficulty and obeyed; but Stella, now that help had arrived, was stunned to inaction, and the white token fell at her feet.

"That's right, Stella! Don't touch it!" Gideon turned to Phineas, who was feebly trying to restore order to his apparel. "You brass-mouthed sneak! I heard you kiss her, heard what you said. If you can't vent your spite on a man without stalking a woman, you'd better get into hoops, or ride a donkey to—the hell you came from! I'm going to carry a Colt's for you after this. If Miss Anthony's name passes your lips to any one, you'll get my bullet! Vamoose!"

In his thirty-odd years of varied life Phineas had beaten down many angry eyes with his dare-devil bravado; yet the blaze of Gideon's passion, boy though he was, tied the sneering tongue, confounded the bold eyes. Phineas turned away, speechless till he was safe outside the copse. From there he sent back a last hot shot. "I did n't know I was poaching on your preserves, you Injun dandy! I resign."

Gideon set his teeth. Body and brain, heart and soul, rebelled against his restraining will, yet he neither replied nor followed. A fighter born, Stella alone, and Stella in trouble, prevented him from giving Phineas the drubbing of his life. Gideon waited till

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the faint sound of footsteps proclaimed Phineas out of earshot before he picked up the handkerchief and turned to the strained face beside him. "Poor little Star!" he said softly.

Another time Stella would have laughed. Three years before, when she shot up in a season to generous womanhood, she had tabooed Gideon's poetic name. "It does n't fit," she said. "I'm such an overgrown thing."

And Gideon answered hotly: "If you grow to six feet the name will fit, always fit! There's a star in each of your eyes; and a—something in your face that—a sort of brooding something that makes me think of a saint's halo." Solitary Gideon, who had his lofty thoughts from Shakespeare, and his training from the still mountains, saw, through the eyes of love, what few who met Stella were pure enough to see.

The tender, childhood name, the love, the sympathy, were as summer sunshine to the snow-wrapped rivulet. Tears, before restrained, came suddenly; and Gideon wiped them away with the rescued handkerchief.

"Don't cry, Moppett! He is n't worth one quarter of one of your tears."

"Oh, I know it, Gideon; but I'm so ashamed, so humiliated."

"The skunk!" Gideon's hands clenched till the knuckles were white. Abruptly he turned to Stella, grasping her arm with the hand that had rested tenderly on her shoulder. A quick flame leaped in his mystic eyes. The touch of her, the intimate nearness, unpermitted since the give-and-take of childhood had passed,

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especially her need of protection,—these fired to vehemence the passion Stella had so far laughed and scolded into the seclusion of his turbulent heart.

“Stella! You shall no longer be exposed to such insults! You must marry me, soon,—now! You must—”

She interrupted him with a hysterical laugh. “What could we do? You’re twenty-one, I’m eighteen. We don’t know enough to take care of ourselves separately; and—”

His grasp tightened till it pained her. “We can learn together! You must—”

Stella’s face grew quickly grave. “No, no, Gideon! I will never marry any man for protection. I’d not dare found a home when I’m so unprepared for its responsibilities. And—do you wish me to be a bar-keeper’s wife?”

Gideon started, stung by the scorn in her question, and released her arm. “But I’ll do something else. I’ll learn—any business you say. I know I can—for—for your sake I can.”

Stella winced at the world of tenderness in his low words. “That’s not done in a minute; and meantime—”

“Meantime,” he interrupted excitedly, hopefully, “meantime we’ll be engaged. We’ll tell Sally B.,—tell everybody; and whoever dares make you unhappy shall feel that!” He held up his doubled fist.

Stella could not help feeling a woman’s gratitude for the comfort and protection Gideon’s loyal courage promised; yet she said nothing, looking down on the

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green breast of Nature, dumbly seeking some wise word from her bounty. Above leaned the comrade and lover of her childhood, no longer a boy, but a man, torn fiercely with a two-edged love, a love as ardent, as tyrannous as his inheritance from his Indian and Spanish ancestors, yet as constant as was his Puritan father's for the beautiful woman who had been Gideon's mother.

"Gideon,"—she turned her eyes, still wet, to his,—
"Gideon, dear, you'd want your wife to love you, would n't you?"

"But you do love me,—you've always loved me."
His words were confident. He faced her, caught up her hands. "Oh, little Star, don't you remember that last night in the station? You put out your hands to me, and said, 'Gideon, how can I leave you?' My whole life was always for you; but that moment I knew I was a man, and loved you as a man loves. You can't know how I wanted to go off on the stage with you. I'd never have stayed if you had n't asked me to."

Stella looked steadily at him, yet did not speak. Gideon was silenced by some strange thing that appeared in her eyes. She grew more and more remote. He saw her slipping from him. Though her hands were in his, her soul was saying farewell.

"Stella!" he cried imperiously, "you know you love me; you can't deny it."

"Yes, Gideon, I love you. I would do anything in my power for you; I think—I think I would risk my life for you, as you've more than once risked yours

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for me. Yet—yet—” She paused, looked up, and smiled at him. Drawing one hand free she brushed a bit of lint from his sleeve, taking unnecessary time for it. She was feeling her way to safety, striving for mastery without a scene. “Yet, Gideon, I know there must be another kind of love, the kind you have for me. You are older than I am, dear. I recognize no change in my feeling for you. I guess I’m still a child, and you’ll have to wait for me to grow up.”

He looked at her sharply, incredulously; did not give back her smile. “You looked grown up enough when you walked by with that white-faced Vincent Tuesday. I hate—”

“Hush, Gideon! You shall not speak so! He’s done you no harm. Do you think you can make me love you by abusing other men?”

He turned away, but she saw his dark face cloud to blackness, his hands open and close, his fingers set deep into his palms. A vertical vein in his forehead grew dark and full, a sign she dreaded.

At last his angry eyes fixed hers, and he spoke sullenly. “If it was n’t for him you’d care for me. He has stolen—”

Stella interrupted him desperately. “Gideon, listen!” She caught his arm, and he felt her tremble, though her look was fearless. “I know I shall never love you as you should be—as I must love the man I marry. You must not expect—not hope for it. I know what such love should be,—know I would rather live alone all my life, and see the man I loved pass once a year on the street, than marry any other!”

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"Yes, that's right! But you'd want to kill the woman who kept him from you!"

"No, no, no! For she would be the one he loved! Should I wish to make him unhappy?"

He started as if struck. He did not speak, but gazed at her questioningly, grappling with the new idea. Gradually she saw conclusion dawn in his speaking face, an unsatisfying conclusion. He laughed, a strange mingling of relief, regret, mirthlessness. "Yes, Stella, it is as you said; you're not grown up. You don't know love,—not yet,—or you would never say those words." He dropped his head dejectedly.

Pity awoke as danger seemed averted. "Go back to town, Gideon, please. I'm so sorry! I'm—you know I wouldn't willingly hurt you, don't you? Please go."

She stooped, and lowered her lids that he might not see the trembling tears. But he did not speak; and presently she looked at him again, her gaze drawn by his silence. A tense motionlessness held him, and she saw a flame rise and gleam in his eyes. The warm blood again flooded cheek and lip, thrilling her with misgiving.

"Yes, Stella, I will go. But I shall come again, another man,—though I'll have the same heart. Whatever it is that gives a man charm for a woman, that I'll find. And you shall 'grow up' very suddenly when next you see me. You shall love me,—do you hear, Stella? Don't think I shall fail,—you *shall* love me!"

With no good-bye he shot out of the copse.

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It was Stella's first defeat. Bewildered, apprehensive, a lonely hour she battled before she felt able to face again the Argus-eyed little town.

As she rose to go, a piece of folded paper caught her attention. She picked it up, and opened it to find a meaningless jumble of words written in a hand she knew was not Gideon's. It must be something belonging to Phineas. Should she return it to him? No. Evidently it was of no importance. She would tear it up. Yet some secondary impulse impelled her to put it in her pocket; and when she was again at the hotel, to lay it away among her papers.

CHAPTER IX

ALFRED SCORES FOR THE COMPANY

GLOOM filled the small office in Sacramento where the affairs of the Central Pacific Railroad were mapped and ordered. The newspapers had exploited the organization of the San Francisco and Washoe Railroad Company in scarehead, despatch, and editorial. San Francisco papers especially had accepted the enterprise as a foregone conclusion, bulwarking their prophecies with baseless calumnies against the Central Pacific Company.

Charles Crocker, waiting alone, glowered over the papers in vain search for some grain of comfort. Even the Sacramento "Clarion," so long their stanch supporter, was lately lukewarm, or silent. The church bells were ringing, but not for him. No hour of night or Sabbath was safe from his consciousness of this gigantic burden, which daily grew. The brooding man remembered his prosperous little business in the city, with room enough above the store for his thrifty wife and growing children. Days were busy then, nights peaceful; and Sabbath bells called not in vain.

But Theodore T. Judah's audacious dream, the faith he inspired in the four big-visioned men, the Railroad Bill's weary progress through war-beset Congresses, and finally, that portentous day for the Pacific Coast, that eighth of January, 1863, when, amid

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the huzzas of all California, they turned the first spadeful of earth for the transcontinental road,—all these pictures came and went. In those days, ten, fifteen, twenty millions,—no sum was too much for the State to pledge in aid of this, the world's greatest task. But the transportation companies saw their Waterloo looming in the future, and began their fight, a fight growing ever more relentless. Still "The Four" would not entertain the possibility of defeat, though friends as well as enemies saw it for them.

Charles Crocker remembered the angry scorn of friends and relatives when he sold his business, literally threw his children's bread into the maw of the railroad. "Idiot!" some had said. "No, crazy! He should be locked up, and his property put in his wife's hands!" others had averred.

"They were right," the depressed man thought this morning, as he reviewed the bitter struggle,—the State's reluctant bond issue of a million and a half, her effort to "take back the puny gift," and, when defeated in that, her attempt to evade paying the interest. Thirty miles to the east "The Four" had pushed their enterprise with their own stout hearts and purses, only to meet an impregnable wall of resistance. Yet the two black years of waiting had passed, battles had been won, time and confidence gained; and the long-silent hammers were again ringing their attack upon rock and iron. Daylight had dawned over the Eastern horizon.

And now this lightning stroke from Nevada! Would those hard-headed miners be so duped? Would they

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not see the trick, the trap? Not see that the beginning of a second road would wreck the chances of both? Would they not see that the Central Pacific, already begun under the wing of the Government at Washington, was the only sure relief from the tyranny of the transportation companies that almost prohibited daily bread in Nevada? They *must* see! The Central Pacific must win! Wife, family, honor, all were bound up in the little iron string that four men had promised to carry into the heart of the continent.

Mr. Crocker rose quickly upon the entrance of Mr. Hopkins and the railroad president, glad for the interruption of his unwelcome thoughts.

"Tell me what on earth those fellows base their claim for Government aid on," he asked before the others were seated.

"Not much on earth, mostly in heaven," the President replied, laughing.

"I'm glad you can laugh, Governor; I'm not in the mood. And I don't understand you."

"Perhaps my news is later than yours. The San Francisco and Washoe Company claim a shorter, more feasible route than ours, and the certainty of a more speedy arrival at the State line. Here is the way Vincent shows them up." The Governor opened a Carson City paper that contained a half-page pictorial map of the San Francisco and Washoe Railroad route.

Placerville was conspicuous as the initial point. Above this a train of rickety cars pulled by a tiny engine was climbing a tortuous, impossible grade that ended at a perpendicular rock, up which passengers

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were toiling on long ladders for hundreds of feet. The road then dived into a tunnel and emerged against another blank wall. This the Senate Committee was climbing zigzag on mules, a force of men cutting the path from the rock in front of them as they travelled. The summit gained, a yawning abyss opened. An incredible bridge spanned it, only to land the travellers against a third cliff. They were lifted to the top of this by a windlass, and dropped in the same way to Lake Tahoe, where laughable shallops ferried them to a point in the centre marked, "State Line," and set them adrift upon the four winds and forty waves.

Around the Nevada side of the lake stood a close row of miners hugging bags of gold, stern negatives on their faces. Behind them loomed dimly the Capitol at Washington, and the National Treasury Building, heaps of coin showing through windows, barred, save at one point where Uncle Sam was pouring golden dollars into the Central Pacific basket.

The travellers, Louis McLane at their head, stretched out their dripping arms beseechingly to the Nevadans. And underneath the map was this dialogue: "We, too, want Government pie; get it for us, and we'll divide with you." And the Nevadans answered, "No, you won't; you've always eat the hull pie before."

"Did Vincent do that?" The Superintendent looked incredulous.

"Yes; and more. I am in receipt of Carson City and Virginia papers containing articles showing up the

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pretensions of the San Francisco and Washoe Company in telling sarcasm; and by inference placing our company in most favorable light. But you can read these at your leisure. There's great news in Vincent's letter!"

The Superintendent had lost his despondency. "We did right to trust that young chap. What's the biggest thing he's got to say for himself?"

"For us, you mean, don't you, Crocker? He's got Senator Stewart out in print against the S. F. & W. proposition, and favoring us; and the Nevada Legislature has turned the S. F. & W. people down."

"That's two items, both large," interjected the exact Treasurer.

"But Vincent's only a boy, and this is astute work for an old politician. Is n't he over-confident? Are you sure these things are done to stay?" asked Mr. Crocker, sceptically.

"Vincent's all right. You can read for yourself soon. Cadwallader made a big bluff with his petition, but Vincent was n't idle in the lobby. When the measure came up, the Nevada Solons asked Cad to show the names and stock subscriptions behind his glittering generality of 'respectable and well-known capitalists, and ten millions.' Cad asked for a week's time to make good, and they gave it to him." The Governor chuckled contentedly.

"What did he do?" Mr. Hopkins inquired with eager interest.

"By George! He skinned out to Placerville; and a man Vincent hired went on the same stage. That

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railroad company was a myth; did n't even exist on paper, till Cad arrived and set 'em sharp at it, with McLane at the head. They organized then; and how much stock do you suppose was subscribed, after all that bluster?"

"A million?" asked the Superintendent, tentatively.

"Just nine thousand dollars!"

The two listeners were amazed, unconvinced.

"That's a fact," the Governor reasserted.

"But what about the ten millions capital?" Charles Crocker wondered if the black goblins of the morning had been, after all, only scarecrows of his own conjuring.

"That's what they are *going* to get from the Government." The President smiled at the incredulous faces before him.

Scorn tinged the relief in the Superintendent's face. "Why, they're bigger fools than Thompson's colt! Did Vincent show 'em up in the papers?"

"He has n't yet. He's sensible as well as sharp. He told Stewart only enough to get him to declare himself, promising proof when it was needed. Vincent's argument was this: that the people behind the San Francisco and Washoe Railroad are n't dead, if their road is; and unnecessary hostility to their schemes would react unfavorably on Nevada, in higher freight tariff, and in other ways—a matter to be avoided as far as possible while our road is building."

"Mr. Vincent has a long head for one so young," the Treasurer said, appreciatively.

"Yes; Mr. Huntington has n't overestimated him.

Vincent says, further, that we can work better if the opposition fancies we have n't seen through their little scheme; and of course he is right. The boy proposes to leave our employ."

"What?" cried Mr. Crocker. "After euchring those fellows so slick! What's the matter with him?"

The Governor's eyes were merry. "He says he's now known as our agent, and his usefulness as a secret worker is over for the present. He thinks he should have some inconspicuous position for a time, and suggests that of brakeman, where he can catch a little of what is going on, and yet fall out of public view."

"By Jove! Vincent's a trump!" Mr. Crocker exclaimed, positively.

"Yes; ace high," the Governor assented.

"But he's cost us a good deal," the anxious Treasurer interposed.

"Wait, Hopkins, till you see his expense account," the President returned.

"That's a good point the boy makes about lying low for a while." Mr. Crocker rose and slowly paced the small room, seeking brain stimulus, masculine fashion, by thrusting his hands deep in his pockets. "I'll make him a brakeman as soon as you'll let me have him, Governor. He'll skip from freight to passenger in no time."

"That'll save us something in salary; though—" the Treasurer paused.

"What? You would n't reduce his salary, would you?" vociferated the pedestrian, returning to his chair.

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"No; I suppose we must not, after what he has accomplished for us." The Treasurer's voice was weary. No mother with a lean purse and a hungry six could better plan through sleepless hours to make one dollar do the work of two than this watch-dog of the Central Pacific Company's treasury, a treasury hardly besieged and seldom replenished. Not even his associates knew how, back of his gentle courtesy, always stalked the gaunt ghosts of bills nearly payable, of bills due. Yet ever upon the threshold of exposure, Mark Hopkins laid them low. The Central Pacific Company never failed to meet its obligations.

"What is the expense account?" he asked, solicitously.

"Prepare to faint, Hopkins. It's a hundred and ten dollars."

"Impossible, Governor! The youngster could n't stay a week in Carson City and play his part for less than three times that."

"True. But he received a couple of hundred or so for his newspaper work, and has turned that in. Regrets it was n't more." There was real affection in the Governor's voice. "He slings a biting pen, does the boy. It's facile and engaging, too. Here's one of his articles; it gives the truth about Freeport. Listen." He read from one of the clippings Alfred had sent:

"And what of Freeport, that great metropolis at the head of tidewater on the Sacramento River? Its founders claim that it rivals the city of Sacramento, that it is free from the menace of flood, that it has

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superior facilities for shipping, and all the other requisites for a railroad terminus, the western terminus of the great transcontinental San Francisco and Washoe Railroad!

"Freeport! A town of half a dozen shanties! Freeport! Without postoffice, because the express companies like to carry letters at half a dollar apiece. Without wharf,—there has been neither time, money, nor inclination to build it. Without depot,—what need for a depot in a spot where neither coach, steamer, nor train ever makes connections? Where are the stores, dwellings, public buildings that help to make a city? Nowhere short of Sacramento, twelve miles away. And who are the people who live here, doing the great volume of business advertised? They are chipmunks and Indians!"

"There 's more of it, but I won't take your time, now," the Governor said.

"Freeport?" snorted the Superintendent. "It's nothing to us!"

"Oh, yes, it is. It has a connection with the Sacramento Valley Road, and that's no myth. It's going on to Placerville; threatens our territory."

"If we could only get a grip, someway, on that S. V. road," the Treasurer said, hopelessly; "but we can't."

"Not unless—" the Superintendent began, but paused.

"Not unless the good Lord calls Robinson home," Mr. Hopkins finished.

"The Lord! Do you suppose he'll ever have use for Robinson?" the Superintendent asked, scornfully.

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"It's San Francisco we have to fight. She's behind them all;—the San Francisco and Washoe Railroad, the express companies, Robinson, and his Sacramento Valley Road, and all the rest." The Treasurer's words were uncheerful.

"Poor San Francisco!" the Governor exclaimed, rising and standing by a window that looked upon the busy river. "She sits on her shifting hills, snubbing California, tyrannizing Nevada, scorning the world. She thinks she's Earth's only golden daughter, that she has no need of the iron thread we 'shop-keepers' are stringing across the Sierras. But our thread of iron shall become her chain of steel. The 'shop-keepers' shall be arbiters of her fate. Poor, short-sighted city! She shall see her trade divided, her rivals prosperous. Where she should have been queen she shall be vassal. Her children might be millions,—they will be only thousands. To-day she fights us, and throws away the chance of becoming America's greatest city."

Under the Governor's thrilling prophecy gloom vanished; and the three set to work with fresh vigor upon importunate details.

CHAPTER X

THE LONELY BATTLE WITH THE STORM

A FIERCE April storm, the severest of the year! Wet snow, melting almost as it fell, wrapped the town in a sheet of red mud.

It was wearing toward dark, and the stage, seven hours late, had not yet arrived. Stella stood alone by the hotel office window, looking up at the mountain peaks, which loomed distant and ghostly through the fitful flakes. Rarely did snow fall at that altitude; and its untimeliness, after two months of summer-like spring, doubled Stella's depression. She was worn with anxiety. This was Uncle Billy's trip. Out in the storm, toiling through huge drifts, plunging into shadowy gorges, continually seeking the treacherous, shifting road, facing the fierce winds and the bitter cold of the high summits,—oh, would he come safe through?

The wires had gone down. The last word had been from Coburn's, where he had passed, safe and on time. But Coburn's was only at the eastern doorstep of the Sierras! Along Donner's frozen shore, zigzagging up the awful steeps, across the trackless Summit Valley where the summer road lay twice a coach's length beneath the winter snow road,—Stella trembled with fear, and prayed that Uncle Billy's passengers might be men of courage and strength, young men. Poor Uncle Billy! He was so old!

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Fifty, forty,—even the prime of life is old age to youth so lately embarked on the soul's voyage.

Stella turned from the dark landscape to read again Gideon's letter that had come the day before, another perturbing portent.

It was dated at Virginia City. "Fortune has been good to me, sweet Star," he wrote; "so good that I pour libations to her shrine, and trust her to give me in due time the one great gift that is all of life for me. Do you remember, Mopsey, how we used to read together of Lorenzo and Jessica? And I would plan to go away and make myself a man your father would not despise; or despising, would lose you to me, even as the Jew lost his daughter. But I could never bring myself to leave you till you yourself sent me away.

"I'm glad I dared fate. Such incredible luck I've had! I was prospecting in the gorge just above your father's old, worked-out mine, and in a dilapidated cabin—built since we left there, it was—I found a cigar box with a lot of bullion in it. It must have been years there; for it was half covered with pine needles fallen through a hole in the roof.

"I came to this city, sold the stuff, bought stocks, sold them, bought again; and have now five thousand dollars good money in the bank, besides more that I've saved, and my stock. That five thousand shall not be touched. It is to found a home, our home!

"You shall not be a bar-keeper's wife. I'm studying men. I'm trying to learn the things you'd have me know. I thank your father for giving me so much knowledge from books; yet in real life I find a sort of

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snap-and-go that's beyond books someway, too quick and evanescent to be caught by a pen before it is fled. That I'm trying to acquire. I shall never be white and neat like—never take to kid-gloved, indoor vocations; but something large and respectable I shall do, that you won't be ashamed of. I think it will be teaming. There are a couple of outfits here that go at sheriff's sale to-morrow. If I can get them cheap enough, and trusty men, I'll buy, and lease other teams. Perhaps I'll have Ingram's Fast Freight Line started before your dear eyes are reading this. (Every word's a kiss!)

"And soon I'm coming to you—when I'm used to my cane; and my clothes and I are older friends; and when I've picked up a few more points on stocks—and men.

"There's some secret on foot. Cadwallader has been here for a week or two. He was blowing harder than ever when he left, two days ago; said Virginia was doomed, mines worked out, and a lot more. That means something's in the wind. I look for a strike somewhere—the announcement of it, rather. It has already happened, I'm sure; but the owners are keeping dark till they can buy in all the stock at bed rock figures.

"Good-night, little Star! These long weeks have been years to me. When I come you'll see a different Gideon,—the same heart, though,—and you'll think me better than the old Gideon, your lover always."

It was his first man's letter to Stella. She marvelled

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at its fluency, yet recalled their childish game of post-office, and his smoothly worded though ink-blotted epistles.

Who was Gideon? Many times she had asked this question of him, once of her father. He told her that Gideon was a waif, and bade her think of something else. She well remembered her father's lowering frown. The two children had speculated, woven romantic genealogies, until Gideon half believed himself heir to the Spanish grandee his fancy conjured from Imagination's castled realm.

Stella glanced at the sheet again, as if it held some occult message, some hidden command. Every sentence spoke possession. It was as if the interview on the hillside had never been. Gideon meant to buy her with his money, compel her love through his passion, bind her with the subtle chain of association, plus loneliness.

She started from the window with sudden, unaiming energy, as if she would shake free a hand already grasping her. The sharp rap and dull thump of Alvin's alternating crutch and shoe came down the street, welcome sounds to her.

The monkey married the baboon's sister —
Smacked his lips, and then he kissed her ;
Kissed so hard he raised a blister !
She set up a yell !

Like a draught of cool air on a hot cheek came his merry voice and rollicking song.

"Are you here, Miss Stella?" he asked, poking

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his head through the door into the dim room. "You stood at the window a minute ago."

"Yes; and so glad to see you, Alvin. Come in. It's an awful day, and—Uncle Billy—do you think—" She stopped to hide the tremble in her voice.

"No, I don't think—I know Uncle Billy's O.K. He'll pull in soon. Why, he's the safest driver on two roads.

"Oh, yes; but, Alvin, there's always a last time."

"It won't come for Uncle Billy for a coon's age yet, an' that's sure pop! Don't you know, I'm a prophet, and the son of a prophet!"

Stella smiled at the boy's nonsense; smiled behind her tears, for Alvin's nonsense might be a boy's, but his heart was a man's, and kind.

"I can't stop a minute. Here's some stuff that's been on my mind ever since it went through on the wire before daylight yesterday. It's Choctaw to me. Some man's cipher, all right; but I'll bet a cookie that's Blowhard Cad's signature."

Stella looked up quickly, apprehension in her face. "That means—"

"Some deviltry to our Company. Say! You know everything; maybe you can figure it out. And say! Mum's the word. I ain't supposed to let any one see what goes over the wire, you know. So long." He handed her a bulky envelope and turned.

"Is it all this?" Stella began, when Alvin broke in:

"Oh, my work's in there, too. Say, Miss Stella, you're a bully teacher! My brains are growing so fast my skull aches. I must skip, or my Chief'll call me

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before I get back, and that'll mean—" He drew his finger across his throat, laughed merrily, and almost closed the door, when he turned back a sheepish face, and in a voice to match, said, "There's a note to Vi in there; would you—would you—"

Stella laughed. "Oh, yes, I will; but I'll tell her mother, too."

"Ye—s, I s'pose that goes, O. K., too. Good-bye. I'm gone."

Stella heard him stumping off down the street, watched him through the dim light climb the muddy hill to the little box where he was jailed with the "clicker" twenty-four hours a day, save the three—sometimes only two—short respites the chief operator in Sacramento gave him for meals. Stella thought of the eerie nights, thought of Alvin's social nature, and sighed. No wonder his predecessor had been discharged for drunkenness. But Alvin was made of better stuff.

His wise mother had stimulated him no less by her patient needle, that mended for homeless men, than by her large expectations of him. She had her reward in his ambition, his devotion to his work. The majesty of the Central Pacific Railroad Company robed him like a garment. His only concern was lack of training; and when Stella had offered to teach him by letter, his grateful response was so prompt and voluminous that Stella's part was no light task. From her letters he learned more valuable things than the tedious mathematics and excellent English she taught him; and he returned the frank confidence of a clean young heart.

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To-night the budget went unopened. She extracted the note addressed to Viola, carried the rest to her home-made desk in Grandma'am's room, and went to supper.

But Yic Wah's best efforts were unappreciated. She toyed with her food, listening tensely for a herald of the stage, and was gladdened at last by the shout that announced its coming.

Doors were flung open, and anxious eyes peered into darkness, watching a black object embody itself from the night and labor up to the lamplit express office. Stella saw a rigid form on the box, and ran down the sidewalk to learn for herself if it was really Uncle Billy. He did not move; only a feeble voice testified to life.

"Some one take the lines, I—I cain't open—my fin-gehs," he said, as kind hands held hot whiskey to his lips. "Don't mind me yet." The words came thickly between swallows. "Take the po' fellehs out from where they stand, won't you? Boys, you all take hold—those hosses played a lone hand—don't make 'em pull the ole—wagon up that muddy hill—to-night. Po' Snorteh! It's good-bye for him—I reckon. He's—"

His words dwindled to a whisper, and the huddled figure, relaxed from the long strain, drooped lower and lower.

"Boys, he'll fall! Some o' you lift him down!" called Sally B., sharply. "Be keerful! Don't straighten his fingers too quick!"

"And some of you bear me also to my downy couch, won't you? I, too, am a frozen wayfarer, Sally B."

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Phineas climbed out of the coach and stepped up to Sally B. with proffered hand.

"Oh, you git!" she said, half vexed, though she laughed. "Why did n't you set on the box an' spell Uncle Billy with the lines, you skunk? You are younger'n him."

"I ain't driving Charley Crocker's stage. I'm his passenger."

Sally B. hustled him aside, and cleared the way for the men who carried Uncle Billy, protesting feebly, to her best chamber, where the two women took him in charge.

But their ministrations, and the sight of Stella's pitying face, roused him for a minute only; he was soon in the vision-laden spaces where tricksies make jest of human travail. For long hours, under a wearying conglomeration of angles and curves that Grandma'am called a "dream of the night," poor Uncle Billy tossed and moaned, fought over again his lonely battle with the storm.

"Keep it up a little longer, boys. Lights ahead—no, lights out! Fly, boys! The mountain's falling! Po' Snorteh, down again! Git up, boy! Pull up, there! Now, altogetheh! Uncle Billy must stick—by the stage, live—or die—save the treasure,—don't, Stella, dear! The old man ain't wo'th a teah from—yo' sweet—good-bye, little one. Uncle Billy cain't go any—"

Stella's tears fell unheeded on the stiff, blistered hands while the story of the awful drive grew out of his fevered babblings. Toward morning he was

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quieter. Stella declared she could not rest, but Sally B. drove her to her room; and nature and youth soon prevailed. She awoke late in the morning, depressed by a dread her rest had not banished. Her first thought was of Uncle Billy; her next was of Phineas; and from him her mind flew to the strange despatch. She dressed hastily and ran down stairs, attacking it at once. Fruitlessly she searched for a clew, some prescience of its importance holding her to the task heedless of breakfast and of Uncle Billy. Suddenly the significance of the paper she had picked up on the hillside after her encounter with Phineas flashed upon her. She found it, and began her work anew, rewarded at last by a message that whitened her cheek, unsteadied her hand. Waiting for neither breakfast nor wraps, she flew up the hill to the station.

CHAPTER XI

TRACKED

ALVIN saw Stella coming, and sprang to the door. "Heard the news?" he shouted before she could speak. "Virginia and Truckee Railroad's a go this time, sure. No sardines behind it, like before, but men; money, too. They'll build from Virginia to Reno, and we'll meet 'em there. It'll help us like sixty!"

All this was poured out impetuously as she came toward him, her mind scantily comprehending the import of his words, though a mental flashlight told her that the completion of the roads would make forever unnecessary such drives as Uncle Billy's latest stormy trip.

"Oh, Alvin," she panted; "that cipher despatch,—it means—it means death! What shall we do? If the Chief knew you showed it to me—"

"No matter what happens to me! Tell me, quick, what's in it!"

"But I must n't get you discharged, Alvin." She had the woman's mind, that delays, protects, conserves; and she hesitated.

But Alvin had the masculine courage that destroys boldly to build again boldly. "The discharge of one or more two-bit operators don't count 'longside of this matter. Mr. Vincent's due on the Extra in a minute.

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He's O. K. for the Company's inside business, if he is only a brakeman. Hoppin' grasshoppers! What for do you suppose the Company uses a twenty-four carat man like Vincent for scratchin' kitchen window-glass?"

Stella's heart echoed the question, though his humble occupation brought Alfred every other night to the town,—made of Sally B.'s bare boards a splendid palace. "Every minute's precious," she said. "What if the train's late? If Mr. Vincent is not—" A whistle interrupted her.

"There she is!" Alvin exclaimed, turning toward the rocky promontory that hid the train, though the reverberating whistle sounded from across the gorge.

"I'll start back," Stella said. "If Mr. Vincent's not aboard,—they may have transferred him,—wave to me when I come in sight under the hill."

The train puffed in. Alvin gave despatch and translation to Alfred with a whispered explanation; and Stella saw no hand wave from the doorway.

It needed little time for him to read and verify Stella's solution. He took the shorter of the two messages first. "D. B., San Francisco. To be called for. Buy G. & C. at any price, contiguous lodes if possible. Big strike. Secret yet. C. P. 2 & 4."

Alfred scowled. "Secret information for favored buyers. When did you get this?"

"Wednesday morning before daylight."

"What were you up to at that time in the morning?"

"Nothing. The stuff waked me going through, it was so queer. The minute I heard the signature I smelt a mice."

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"What do you mean?"

"'C. P. 2 & 4.' is Blowhard Cad's signature, I'm sure. I heard it once before."

"Those initials are ours."

"Sure, they're Cad's, too, backward. That's why he uses 'em, so anything crooked he does will be charged to us." Alvin grinned, but was quickly serious again. "There's worse—the wire's been tapped."

"How do you know that?"

"'Cause I asked every operator clear down the line from Virginia if he heard any Choctaw going through; and not one clicker east of here had it. At Sacramento the night man heard it, but paid no attention to it."

"It's a State's Prison offence."

"Oh, yes; but Cad won't go to prison. You'll see! How'll they catch him? And, anyway, the fellers he's working for in San Francisco'll save him. They'll have to, if they save their own skins."

Alfred was heedless. He was reading the second despatch. "A. C. & O., San Francisco. To be called for. Everything fixed. 'Flora' leaves Friday at ten, with five hundred tons iron. P. Q. undertakes the job for price we offered. No mistake. Timed for the Straits. Don't let her take passengers. C. P. 2 & 4."

"Good heavens!" Alfred cried, dropping into a chair by the desk, and reaching for clip and pencil. "This is Friday, and—" He took out his watch. "Nine-five! Got a San Francisco paper, Al?"

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"Yes; but it's several days old."

"No matter! Find out quick what dock the 'Flora' leaves, then get to your key. We must beat lightning to-day!"

The two were silent, Alvin nervously turning the paper, Alfred scratching despatches. Evidently the "Flora" was not a regular boat; her name was not in the shipping lists.

"We'll have to send the message on trust then. Quick, Al! Tell the operator down there it means life or death to officers and crew—this message does. Tell him to put a man on a horse—I'll stand the expense—anything to get word to the 'Flora' in time! Oh, sign my name. It won't do to have the Company show up in this."

Alvin bent over his key. Men came and went, Alvin holding off trainmen and "commercial" messages alike with the decisive words, "Company's business." He looked up at last, breathing freer as he spoke. "They'll do it," he whispered to Alfred. "They know where the 'Flora' lies. They have twenty minutes to catch her."

Alfred sent a second message to the Company's office in Sacramento, telling of Alvin's discovery, and asking relief from his train for the day. A third despatch went to the County Sheriff, telling him of the wire tapping, and of the evidence against Cadwallader.

While waiting for replies Alfred wrote to Governor Stanford, enclosing the cipher despatches and their translations. But this was soon done; and the two men, oppressed with their death-laden secret, watched

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the clock feverishly. Men came to report, or to receive train orders; a stranger or two sent messages; and later Alvin received and forwarded Superintendent Gregory's daily budget, struggling vainly for his usual correctness, and paling at his Chief's quick censure.

The minutes dragged as intolerably for Alfred, though he wore his mask more easily than Alvin. Would they be in time? Would they catch the little steamer before she left port for her fate? Even then, would they find the infamous secret before its fateful moment arrived? What would it be? Powder? A slit in the hull? A cunning injury to the boiler?

At last San Francisco called. Alvin sprang to the key. The steamer had started, had been hailed, had waited for a small boat and the message, and had gone on her way.

Alfred rose, as stiff with the tension as if minutes had been hours. "That's all we can do at that end. Keep your eye and ear busier than your tongue, Al, for the rest of the day. I'm off to settle with his nibs, Phineas Cadwallader. By the way, could n't you contrive some way to get him left? The train reported late in leaving, false report, something like that?"

Alvin nodded. "Guess I can think up that trick in four hours."

At the hotel Alfred took only time to don riding boots, and to find Stella for a hurried word. "Get Sally B. to hold Cadwallader here over train time, if it's possible," Alfred said before his good-bye. "It may mean everything to the Company. I'll return to-night, if I can."

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A swift horse took him to the "Front," where he found the Superintendent riding his beat. Alfred told his story briefly, and asked if there was a lineman on the force.

"Jupiter! You can't track that man, Vincent! The snow's come and gone since that Hecate's job was done."

"But, Mr. Gregory, he'd have to cut the wire, and he'd have to climb a tree or a pole to do it. Could that be done without leaving a trace?"

"What then? How can you prove it was he?"

"How'll I know I could n't prove it, unless I try?"

"Go it, young man, and the Lord be with you! I'll be shot if I don't believe in your pluck! If you could jail that hound, we'd break the opposition up in business. There ain't but one Cad. The devil himself could n't find an imp to match him!"

Alfred made some reply, and waited for the other to speak again.

"Linemen don't show up often in my diggings. I'll ask Bennett; his section begins here."

Inquiry discovered an intelligent man who had worked on the line. His climbers were at camp near by; and Mr. Gregory's resourcefulness provided horse and saddle. The two men set off without delay. They rode fast till within nearly five miles of Dutch Flat, Alfred judging that, since Phineas took the stage there, his exploit must be in that neighborhood.

The afternoon was past its half when they began to inspect each pole and wire-touched tree with close scrutiny. "We'll work east over these five miles to

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Dutch Flat," Alfred said. "If we find nothing we 'll have to stay over night in town, go east a short distance in the morning, and then take it west from here."

For the first two or three miles their search was unrewarded by any sign. Just at sunset, in a windy little vale, the lineman's practised eye caught a peculiar piecing of the wire; and he climbed nimbly to inspect it. It was not a joining made by the regular force, but a recent cut. The marks of the climbers were also fresh.

"Is there anything about it to distinguish it from regular work?" Alfred asked.

"You bet! Any chump could tell, if he see it close, that it was the work of an amachure, by the way the wires are tied."

That was something gained, but not enough. "How did the man get up there?"

Before the man could reply Alfred's eye was caught by the gleam of a crescent of burnished gold. Lying half imbedded in the wet remains of a snow-drift, its upper surface washed clean and shining, he found a cuff button of a peculiar design,—a star within a crescent, the two free points tipped with diamonds.

He knew it; he knew who owned its fellow! Turning it over he saw the engraved initials, P. C.

"Good enough!" he called. "We need no more evidence. You can go on to town for the night, or back to camp, as you choose. I'll ride too hard for you, perhaps."

The man chose to turn back. Alfred arranged for payment for the extra work, and again rode east.

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In a few minutes he arrived at the Dutch Flat office and telegraphed Alvin, asking of Phineas. Five minutes later he was reading the reply:

"C.'s here, pacing the platform like a mad gobbler. We did the leaving trick for the regular train O.K. But he thinks he's going on the special in spite of fate."

"Let him go in peace," Alfred wired back; and immediately sent a message to the sheriff at Auburn that was answered after two hours as follows:—"Sheriff's office, Auburn. P. C. walked into my arms as unsuspecting as a lamb. He had no time to destroy incriminating evidence. Is now resting noisily in the cooler."

Alfred stretched his weary legs, and went out into the cool evening. The day had been stressful, and a bed would have been welcome. Yet, Stella! He looked into the overhead blue and saw a young moon that might last till eleven o'clock.

"A light night! I can ride fast and do it by ninety," he said to himself with sudden cheer. "Stella!"

A hasty snack at a nondescript restaurant, a fresh horse, and he was again in the saddle, following the stage track westward, re-riding the miles that he might have an hour with Stella—dear Stella, who had discovered the plot, and whose service to humanity and to the Central Pacific Railroad Company might never be known to more than Alvin and himself.

CHAPTER XII

"OUR BANNER SHALL FLOAT RED"

GEORGE GREGORY urged his horse to a gallop over the rough path that skirted the long string of ties,—ties that had waited many days for iron. One of his intense headaches, increased by perplexities that hovered goblin-like over waking and sleeping hours, unfitted him for further distractions; yet they came, fleetly and in numbers.

The noon hour was on. At all the camps men and beasts were feeding. White men at long tables in tents that were struck every few days, and reset farther east; Chinamen chattering in their smaller camps; horses and mules staked anywhere and everywhere. It was but a fuel-taking lull in the battle, never inspiring, to-day depressing in the drizzling rain.

The Superintendent took letters and despatches that met him as he dismounted, and, passing his bridle to the man in waiting, went to the lee side of the dining tent to read them before eating. One after another he glanced over yellow slips, tore open envelopes.

"No iron yet. 'Flora' detained," he read, and groaned as he thought of bare ties, and the fifty miles still far from finished.

From the Company's Treasurer was the following:—

“BANNER SHALL FLOAT RED”

“MR. GEORGE GREGORY,

“Supt. Con. C. P. R. R.

“MY DEAR GREGORY:—I note your accounts of forage used, Nos. 128-131 inclusive. There is a marked increase over bills for the month previous. Is this due to an added number of animals? If so I am uninformed as to such increase of stock. Your reports show only twenty-one head more than the month before, which would not account for the increase in consumption of forage.

“Also I note a tendency to waste in the matter of small material, bolts, spikes, chairs, &c.; and to laxness in looking after larger tools. I know very well these things are faults of men under you. Poor or unskilled laborers are always careless in the use of other people’s property. I would suggest a very close watch over these matters, and that a very rigid accounting be exacted from foremen, and all in charge of work or property.

“I regret delay in delivery of iron, but hope you will be able to rush the work sufficiently when we do get it to you.

“Meantime, believe me, my dear Gregory, to have the utmost confidence in your judgment and ability.

“Yours truly,

“MARK HOPKINS.”

Gregory hastily refolded the exquisitely penned sheet, and put it in his pocket. Save! Save! Yesterday it was save and hurry; to-day it was save and wait. What would it be to-morrow? He ground his teeth. A sudden resentment set his temples throbbing, his ears ringing. What could that neat, quiet man in his orderly Sacramento office know of the stress, the harsh fight against man and nature waging here? Heat in summer, snows in winter; lazy, rebell-

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ing men that must be kept and made to work because others to fill their places were not to be had; rebelling rock that fought its slow retreat before pick and powder, adamant where it ought to yield, crumbling where it should be firm.

Snatches of low table talk came to Gregory, fitful straws on gusts that swoop along the track of labor, contrary to the steadier gales of capital.

"The Union Pacific ain't doin' nothin' neither; failed in their contracts," one voice said.

"If that company can't build a railroad next door to cheap food, cheap iron, good forage, and a flat country, what do these C. P. fellers expect to do against a wall of rock standing on edge a mile an' a half high?"

"Yes; an' forty feet of snow on top of that," a third added.

"An' thar's the iron,—not enough to be had, no ships to tote hit, an' twenty thousand miles to come."

The Superintendent heard, though eye and mind were reading letters. He thought of the delayed "Flora," and pain stabbed sharper at his temples.

A shuffling inside warned the Superintendent that the meal was nearly finished. He moved off a little that the men might not guess themselves overheard; scrutinized them keenly as they filed out and sought here or there a sheltered spot for pipe or chew before the short respite ended.

George Gregory knew that men work half heartedly at enterprises that inspire no faith. He wondered

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how they learned their facts,—facts often distorted or half told,—wondered how, from lip to lip, business secrets travelled almost before matters had happened to become secrets. Even the gossipers themselves could not tell the sources of their gossipings. The spread of panic, “underground railroads,” the “grapevine” telegraph, the flash of the tale of “new diggings,” these and the homing pigeon and the lost cat are some of Nature’s riddles.

The Superintendent went inside and ate sparingly of the coarse food, digestion losing its fight to the overwrought brain. Why could not the dinner-time critics, with all their knowings, have gained yet a few other facts? Land jobbers and stock speculators held the Union Pacific franchise by the throat, dallied with the work, cheated their contractors. These cheated in turn, making their cuts narrow and ragged, their fills loose and brush-padded, starving their men, and failing with their time limit. No wonder United States Commissioners refused the road!

But the men of pick and shovel—men upon whom, then as now, depends the success of all contests with nature—saw only the bare fact, failure. And failure in the East meant, doubly, failure in the West!

A second time Gregory read a San Francisco newspaper clipping inclosed in the Treasurer’s letter.

“The Central Pacific Company can never build on time as long as the present owners control the Sacramento Valley Road. That little link, with its Freeport connection, and its arms outreached to McLane’s road going east from Placerville, will put the iron horse to the State Line long before Stanford

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can make good his bluff at his time limit. The State and the National Government should hail McLane and his associates as their saviours from a monstrous steal."

"That's the cussed stuff that works like slow poison among the men, making sight crooked and brains maggotty," Gregory thought aloud as he went to a rude kit for paper and pen. He wrote steadily for an hour, handed letters and despatches to a messenger, and was off again.

Riding west to the end of the rails two hours later, he rounded the elbow of a small hill and came upon a gang of track-layers working alone, the foreman being hidden by a second sharp turn. For a moment the men did not know themselves watched. Some were resting on their hammer handles, some snatching a surreptitious smoke, while low joke and dialogue ran lazily around. Others kept up a noise with half-hearted blows at the spikes.

"Take your time, boys. This is all the iron for a month o' Sundays. Something's gone wrong with the 'Flora,' an' the last lot was shipped on her."

The plunge of the horse, urged upon the men with cruel spur, startled them into rigidity. Gregory's hair bristled under his hat. His nose lifted threateningly. His cheek paled, and his eyes flung a burning spark to every shirking soul.

"You hell-hounds! Call this work? Is this what you're giving the C. P. Company for their good coin? You think any railroad under God's canopy can be built a-sitting on your hammers? I'll break your worm-eaten heads! I'll set men over you with shot-

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guns! I'll send you into kingdom come without woollen overcoats! I'll—" His invectives tore along the line like thunderbolts. Rough men, desperate some of them were, cowered under his blasting tirade, breathing easily again only when he turned to meet the luckless foreman coming round the point.

Honest, devoted to his great enterprise, Gregory yet had courtesy and sympathy for the deserving or unfortunate, but shirkers roused his sleeping anger, broke his usual self-control. And this moment was the culmination of an intolerable day. But the sight of bent backs calmed him; the quick ringing hammers drove resentment from his heart. He thought again of the quiet man in Sacramento with the too often empty purse who must pay, pay! Gregory well knew that Mark Hopkins had days when he saw life not as a living red, but as a deadly black. And the success of the Central Pacific Railroad had come to mean nearly all of life to both of them.

Late in the afternoon a hurrying messenger overtook the "boss" with despatches. "The 'Flora' is at Sacramento. Iron at Front to-morrow. Crocker."

The Superintendent handed the telegram to Bennett. "Pass it along," he said. "Let every man in camp know the iron is coming."

Bennett moved away, and Gregory took off his hat and threw back his head. A long breath of relief brought ease, and he lifted his eyes to the firmament. The gray day had passed. The sun paused in splendor on the western heights, flinging a triumphant

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red banner across to meet the approaching twilight curve.

“Our banner shall float red too, God willing,” he said half aloud, in deep reverence, and rode back to camp.

CHAPTER XIII

VANQUISHED

ALONE in his chamber Phineas gloomed. The Company had prosecuted on the charge of wire tapping only. This troubled Phineas but little. Fulfilling his expectation in case of discovery, certain merchants of San Francisco had raised a large sum for his bail; retained for his defence the best lawyers in the State. As he had been held on the lighter charge he felt sure the plot to blow up the steamer was still secret. He fumed at the stupidity of his underlings, never suspecting another cause might have saved the "Flora."

After all, it did not matter. He was but the cunning manikin at the end of the wire. Those behind the screen must save him, since with his downfall it lay in his power to tear away the screen. Yet—he had bungled. For the first time he had failed,—was found out. If the Central Pacific people won, even if they compromised their case advantageously, and also won out against their time limit, the comedy would be played out, the actors discharged. There would be no further use for screens, or for manikins to perform in front of them. Already the coldness of Phineas's principal backer spoke unforgiveness, hinted at usefulness ended.

Whether chance or plan had given Phineas his

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name he knew not; but he had believed in its meaning, gloried in it. Phineas, mouth of brass; Cadwallader, battle arranger. Many a brazen battle had he arranged and fought to a successful finish. But these were past. The easy, luxurious life was surely gone. The best seat, the finest room, the open cigar-case, drinks that cost him nothing, the still-hunt for secrets, popularity, jollity,—all that he best loved was lost. Instead the—prison, perhaps; but prison or not, labor, years of it; just ordinary labor. He lifted his white hands to see them in prospect rough and hard. His clothes would be old, torn perhaps. Ugh! And coarse viands, a cheerless sleeping-closet—But wait! He could see a loophole, a rift in the dark sky! He rose and flung off the nightmare that had affrighted him. Restlessly he walked the narrow room, his courage rising, while his nimble brain wove him yet another bold plot. Through his attorney he contrived an interview with Governor Stanford that came to pass with unexpected promptness.

The Governor entered, outwardly the genial, rosy citizen adored by California's best, wrapped as with a mantle in his optimistic atmosphere of success. But to-day he was face to face with crime. Phineas's tricks might be veiled,—his tricky heart was not. The Governor measured him in an instant, and went on guard.

"Yes, sir, I can do it; I can deliver the goods," Phineas said emphatically, after a full statement of his proposition, and sharp questions from his listener.

"Let me understand you thoroughly. We'll go

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over it again, and slowly. It is too important a matter to be hurried—or bungled.” The Governor settled himself carefully in his chair, glanced toward a door that opened on a small hall; and sentence by sentence went over the compact Phineas had offered, each word clear, and unnecessarily loud, Phineas thought.

“You agree to deliver into our hands within one month from date a controlling number of shares in the Sacramento Valley Railroad?”

“I do.”

“You agree to enter our employ, and hereafter work for our interests as you have before now worked for those opposing us?”

“I do.”

“You promise to keep secrets intrusted to you, and never by any sort of word or communication to disclose the nature of this interview, to give the slightest hint that it ever took place?”

“I do.”

“Very well.”

There followed a few further details of the bargain. At a nod from the Governor toward the hall door, unseen by Phineas, a man with scratch-pad and pencil entered so quietly that only by the expression on the Governor’s face was his coming announced to Phineas. He turned, and started half out of his chair, yet quickly composed himself again.

“Did you get that perfectly?” the Governor asked of the stenographer.

He nodded affirmatively.

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"Read it." The Governor's voice was stern.

Phineas went ashen as the sale of himself to the corporation he hated, sentence by sentence, was riveted. But he was intrepid still, sitting erect, listening carefully.

"Is that correct, Mr. Cadwallader?"

"Quite so, Governor Stanford." In spite of himself his lips trembled, and he hid them with his jewelled hand. But his tone was steady. It would not be so bad, he thought. He could slip the leash when a better master appeared. This interview—possibly he might even make valuable merchandise of it.

"Then sign it," the Governor said; and Phineas felt himself vanquished by the tone.

He took up the pen, hesitated an appreciable instant, his face contracting slightly yet quickly clearing, and signed.

The Governor did not fail to interpret correctly that hesitancy. He dismissed the clerk, and turned to Phineas. "Mr. Cadwallader, I shall not attempt to conceal from you the satisfaction this transaction affords me. I hope it will not be otherwise with you. Serve us well, and you will find the Central Pacific Company a fair employer."

"I'm sure I shall, sir. I've been in sympathy with you from the start, but I had to serve those who paid me."

The Governor scowled at the bald sycophancy. "Words are cheap, Mr. Cadwallader." He rose, stepped to the door to make sure of privacy, returned and stood near Phineas. His large body, powerful

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instrument of a still more powerful will, towered above Phineas, unconsciously threatening. His eye, not kind as it ever was for friends and right doers, but the eye that confounded malevolence, burned into the other man's very soul, downed his gaze, held him cowering in his chair.

"We shall expect more than words from you, Mr. Cadwallader. And to insure your continual interest in our welfare I have to tell you that we hold a perfect chain of evidence convicting you of intent to blow up the 'Flora.' Our people found the powder, the fuse, the open packages of petroleum. We know the man you hired to carry out the plot, we have a correct reading of your cipher despatch, some certified affidavits,—all that is needed to send you to the penitentiary. This is filed away safely. The day you betray us by word or sign, or to the amount of a two-bit piece, you will be arrested and put on trial. Good afternoon."

The Governor left the room without a glance at the man behind him.

Phineas, motionless, stared at the closed door. A chill crept upon him, freezing his gay nonchalance forever. He flung out his arms on the table, dropped his head, and sobbed like a whipped child.

CHAPTER XIV

HEARTS REVEALED

EARTH careered through her summer solstice and goldened toward an affluent autumn. Yet, heedless of Nature's tremendous sun-heroed drama, man enacted his pygmy farces and thought them great.

Phineas "delivered his goods"; and the historic Sacramento Valley Railroad, the first bit of track on the Pacific Coast, the iron link that proved to be the undoing of the spurious San Francisco and Washoe Railroad, dropped mysteriously into the hands of the Central Pacific Company. Freeport, the young metropolis to be, terminus on paper of a great transmontane road, was dead! Dead hard upon its christening! Dead before it had possessed wharf or postoffice!

The opposition, defeated yet never dead, still cried, "Wolf!" But no cry was loud enough to flutter the brave men at Sacramento. Only Nature and the nation's extremities could retard them now. Frost, snow, gorge and cliff; over-worked iron foundries, Government-impressed and vainly striving to meet their time contracts; ocean storms buffeting frail, iron-laden argosies; the reawakened Union Pacific struggling to outrace the Western builders; and Time with his tireless scythe mowing down the days that limited

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the franchise;—these only stood between dauntless hearts and success. And against these enemies in the open, officers and employees, down to the humblest, took heart of grace and charged again the rocky ramparts of the Sierras.

When the angel of death swept down in the breath of the powder flash upon James Sackett, an unborn child was blighted. It came later to its birth, only to sigh and pass to the care of Him who rules life and the two eternities. Through weary weeks the mother lingered, unaroused to convalescence by hope or by skill of physicians. The warm frontier heart of the town watched and sorrowed with her, cheerfully adding the burden to their laden shoulders; supplying all possible comfort, and every obtainable luxury.

Stella, regularly attentive in the sick-room, reported daily to Alfred. His humble berth of "extra" brakeman had brought his sleeping hours in the little town, left his evenings free. For several weeks he had devoted these to planning a benefit for Mrs. Sackett that was to invade jointly the domains of Thalia, Polyhymnia, and Terpsichore.

For days Stella and Viola had toiled at the tasks Alfred set them. Lessons from books were superseded; and every odd moment was occupied with numerous creations in which cambric, curtains, and sheets did duty for lace, silk, and scenery. Alfred, going to and from Sacramento, supplied, as their need developed, many telling stage accessories, besides beautiful and correct costumes for Stella and himself.

Details, as well as most of the men's parts, rested

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on Alfred; for men were too busy or too bashful for "play acting." He had chosen short extracts from one or two popular plays, and planned a couple of charades representing local interests. He had drilled Viola in the rendering of some songs, and a boy or two in recitation. But the ambitious part of the performance was to be two scenes from "Romeo and Juliet."

Under Alfred's tuition Stella discovered a different Shakespeare from her father's pompous poet. The long hours of close association with Alfred, his refined speech, his dignity and self-restraint where other men she knew would have presumed, gave her a new vision of life. This, and his patient deference to the old woman who often interrupted their work carried on in her room, joined with the bard's subtle words of honey, worked their spell. Stella walked on air. Weight seemed to leave her body. Sleep and food were no longer necessities. All day she longed for evening; all night dreamed it over again. She was journeying the old, old rose-path, believing herself a discoverer!

On the morning of the day of days Gideon returned from his long absence. Stella knew nothing of his wanderings save the little told in his infrequent letters; and she was quite unprepared for the Gideon who presented himself before her. The change she saw in him was mysterious, almost uncanny. Something about him, his clothes, his bow, his voice, an atmosphere she could neither define nor understand, made her feel as if a character before unknown had stepped

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out of a book to meet her. She was glad there was no time for him, that she could plead the pressure of work for the evening.

He had hardly gone when Yic Wah poked his yellow face into Grandma'am's room, where in spite of August heat, four women were plying hurrying needles in last preparations for the evening.

"Charley Clocker, he come now plitty soon."

Yic Wah was a "red-button" Chinaman, an aristocrat in his own estimation, with boundless scorn for the "barbarians" he served. Yet the sixty-dollar salary meant later a princely home in his own loved land; and for this, with Oriental adaptability and sufficient success, he transmuted Sally B.'s coarse provisions into far-renowned viands; though he copied her rough speech with no softening delicacy.

"Cut my shoestrings! Extras, Yic; and hurry!" Sally B. rolled up her work with one hand, smoothed her hair with the other, and was out of the room before the cook's reply was finished.

"You callee me Yic Wah! Sabe? All light. Ex-tas plenty gosh quick. I damn hully," he called after her as he ambled to the kitchen, his words following her flying form to the office door.

Standing in the open doorway, Sally B. began a voluble welcome to her distinguished guest while "he was yet a great way off," her high words carrying like arrows from a taut bowstring. Before he had mounted the last step her arms were about his shoulders, a far audible kiss on his cheek. It was thus Sally B. met her known and important patrons. The kiss and

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embrace were quite impersonal. They would have been bestowed with equal warmth on Mrs. Crocker, the stately Collis P. Huntington, or on George Gregory's delicate New England wife. Probably Governor Stanford would have been a little more warmly pressed, smacked a trifle more resoundingly, because he was the "President," a man of vastly greater importance in Sally B.'s eye than the prating tailor at Washington.

Not to the public wash basin and all-serving roller towel, but to her fastidiously clean best room, kept for such emergencies, Sally B. conducted Mr. Crocker for "a wash-up 'n hair-brush." Without actual need of the ceremony, he was too tactful to decline it, but used Sally B.'s home-wrought conveniences with an appreciative thoroughness that brought broad smiles to her face as she stood by, serving him, and retailing well selected railroad gossip the while. "You kin allers tell a gentleman," she said later to Stella; "he puts the dirt in the water instid of on the towel."

The dinner served to the Superintendent, seated apart in a corner of the dining-room, testified to Yic Wah's fine understanding of the laconic order, "Extras." The flag-draped, fir-trimmed walls, and a stage at the end of the room, aroused Mr. Crocker's curiosity; and Sally B.'s description of the show to be held there that night, "fur the benefit of Jim Sackett's widder," was so eloquent that Mr. Crocker put in her hand the first five dollars, for "a reserved seat," he said.

At six o'clock came a message from Alfred to Stella. "My train is ordered to the Front. You'll have to

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postpone the programme till I come. Set them to dancing; and get Sally B. to explain. She's hostess; it will come properly from her. I'll be there as soon as possible. It will be after ten."

The despatch met Stella as she went in to supper, early to-night, and contrary to her custom. She heard Alfred's train whistle past the town and into the echoing hills. It was not unusual for that train to work over schedule time taking supplies to the "Front," yet to-night its going added to the suppressed excitement hovering everywhere, and filled her with uneasiness.

Mrs. Sackett had been worse that day, and Stella could not shut from her mind the vision of the wasted invalid. Mr. Crocker, sitting in his exclusive importance, added to her agitation. She wished him far away, feared he would send Alfred from her on some further business. She was jealous of the tyrant, business.

A pleasing portent hovered in the air for others, however; also odors of soft soap mingling with frank smells from the kitchen. Yic Wah repeated Sally B.'s loud table orders with strident haste; but aside from this the room was quiet, even the clatter of dishes subdued. Teamsters, trainmen, shop-keepers, saloonmen, gamblers, employees of Ingram, Finn, and Gould's Fast Freight wagon train to leave in a day or so for the desert, the three musicians from Auburn, a travelling minister,—it was an odd companioning of brawn, brain, and guile there at supper under the yellow kerosene lights in Sally B.'s hotel. No table-talk

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served as a sauce to meat; no ceremony graced the daily meal. Men did not eat, they fed—three times a day, if work allowed.

A quick transformation from dining-room to theatre was followed soon by the arrival of the audience from shop and shack, from saloon, camp, distant ranch,—a human mosaic. Grandma'am was esconced in a high niche of vantage on two tables. Sally B. made an effective speech of welcome and explanation; and the ball began.

The flare and dip of candles twinkling in the greens; the twang of fiddle; the scrape of heavy boots in "bow and swing," "slide and hop," "grand right and left," polka mazourka, Highland Schottische, varso-vienne, Money Musk, Sicilian Circle, and Old Dan Tucker; the beautiful, dreamy Spanish Dance; the blunders of the unaccustomed; lively old beaux romping into decorous sets to be caught in a snarl of skirts; the frantic, unavailing efforts of the "caller" to disentangle them; the few well-mated couples that whirled in the dizzying, old-fashioned waltz, winning time from the tired musicians because of their grace and beauty;—how fascinating it all was! Stella had not before guessed the possibilities of her little world.

"Deal yer dances fair, Stella," Sally B. whispered as she sailed by, herself as popular as the light-footed Viola. "Where women's skurce, partiality breeds fights," she added a moment later, when her partner seated her near Stella. "An' look out fur Gid. He's got up to kill, hain't he? He'll be jealous, whether ye give him any call or no."

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Sally B. was a sight to make angels laugh. She had copied the description of a costume in a fashion-book that caught her eye, and sent it with her measure to a Sacramento dressmaker. The material was a rich Mexico blue moire antique, and the pattern sheaves of corn tied with ribbons which were woven in satin texture, all of the same color as the ground. Sally B. mourned because the corn was n't in yellow. This fabric was made with very full skirt, pointed belt, full sleeves, pompadour neck, and trimmed with Spanish *passementerie*, in suspender style, all the trimming underlaid with most vivid yellow. Sally B. "lowed if it had a leetle mite more yaller it would 'a ben powerful gay."

Stella but half listened to Sally B.'s wise advice; her heart was out in the wild with Alfred. She danced automatically, and forgot the warning because Gideon was quickest at her elbow.

"You know no one else can give you as good a dance as I, Stella," he pleaded almost before another had seated her; and bore her off in the face of a dozen disappointed ones.

Stella saw George Gregory pass into the hall and mount the narrow stairs to Mr. Crocker's room. Intuitively she knew something of the grave conference overhead, felt the stress and clutch of the giant these men were pursuing. And when Mr. Gregory returned, she saw him pass his hand over his haggard face and through his hair as if to brush away persistent pain. He nodded pleasantly to the dancers, and stopped an instant to congratulate Sally B. on the

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success of her entertainment. But there was no dancing or jollity for him. In a moment he was out in the night again; and Stella knew that he must ride many miles to his far, bleak camp.

Ten o'clock! Half-past ten! Would Alfred never come? Mr. Crocker came down to look on, and Stella wished desperately, unreasoningly, that he had gone to bed. Was he only waiting for Alfred? Would business chain him? But surely Alfred would insist on this one night,—what little there was left of it.

Ten-forty! A scared-looking boy came in with a note for Sally B. Stella, watching her as she read, saw her face grow white, saw her whisper to the boy and send him away. And she noticed that Sally B. danced and laughed no more.

Alfred came at last, panting, a red spot on his cheek, his lips dry, his boots rock-scratched, and his trousers red with dust.

"No; no supper yet, there is n't time," he said to Stella as she met and questioned him in the hall. "Yes, I walked the nine miles, all that I did n't run." He saw the quick sympathy leap to her eye, but went on quickly. "Make things ready while I change and get my breath. You can begin without me, can't you?"

She nodded, flushed at the look he sent to her over his shoulder from the stair, and ran in to help Sally B. set the programme in motion.

It went better than the usual experience of amateurs; for Alfred was practised in such work, and had drilled his mummers carefully. And the onlookers were so ready to be pleased that the flimsy house

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quaked with frequent applause, and rained pine needles and candle grease impartially on silk and fustian.

All the evening Stella had looked forward to the moment when she might dance with Alfred. During the programme Gideon had knocked at the door of Grandma'am's room, then the "green room," to ask for coming waltzes; and had gone away scowling at Stella's refusal.

Their brief players' moment had passed, when Alfred's eyes had burned into hers, revealing his own heart in Romeo's words:

"Yet wert thou as far
As that vast shore washed by the farthest sea,
I would adventure for such merchandise."

And Stella had breathed her soul with Juliet's:

"My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have; for both are infinite."

Yet now that it was over, it seemed a dream; and Stella began to doubt, to fear. No formal words could more fully disclose them, one to the other; still an intangible veil had dropped between them. Alfred was withheld from her; or did he withhold himself? No matter what it was, this hour she would claim. One dance! Once to feel his arms about her, to fancy him her very own,—she would dare fate for this; would borrow from the future this one little bit of time, nor care what usury she must pay.

Alfred had asked her to keep on the beautiful Juliet gown. Its harmony of color, its silken amplitude

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draping her lovely form without the disfigurement of crinoline, for once fitly robed Stella's large beauty. And the pearls lying against her white throat and on her shining hair made a subtle climax of dress that lifted her into starry splendor.

Not less well did Alfred's blue velvet and lace enhance the elegance of his refined figure. When they entered the ball-room together they were greeted with spontaneous applause. No one there could have defined the impression they made. They stood for all that was poetic, ideal, unmaterial, to those roughly garbed, hard-working, but genuine people of the savage West. The two were the interpretation of the soul of Beauty.

As they neared Mr. Crocker standing by the office door, the jam of onlookers halted them. Some one addressed Stella, and she did not hear Mr. Crocker's low request for an immediate word with Alfred. He told her of it as they walked slowly down the room.

She saw an angry gleam in his eye, saw his set, stern jaw; but he spoke hardly a word. Stella almost felt that his anger was for her. In vain she looked for some tender glance, some whisper that would explain. She could not know that Alfred was fighting one of the few fierce battles of his life; that he was almost ready to strike out with his fist for possession of her, to defy Mr. Crocker, business, all the sane and safe and dutiful things of life. But the wild moment passed; and more than once on his way to the door he looked back tender messages to her. Had she been but a little nearer, had not dancers

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intervened, she would have read the heart-cry he fancied all must hear and jeer at; but he cared nothing for that. It did not carry itself on to Stella; and she was numb with disappointment, as alone among the crowd as if in a dungeon.

The supper hour came; but she would not go with Gideon upstairs, where it was laid in the "corral," fearing that Alfred, in his first search for her, would miss her. Neither would she dance afterward, but sat out a schottische, refusing all on a plea of fatigue.

Gideon danced with no one but Stella, and hung about her, entranced by her new beauty. When at last a waltz was called, love and anger joined hands. "Just a few steps, Stella," he pleaded; "when Vincent comes, I'll give way. Why does n't he come in spite of Charley Crocker, and claim his dance like a man?"

"But he must stay if Mr. Crocker wishes," she said, her lips defending, her heart sore.

"Do you suppose fifty Charley Crockers or railroad jobs would keep me from a promise to you?" Gideon asked vehemently.

Something in Stella's passionate heart responded for a moment to Gideon's lawless flame, though deep in her soul she knew that she more honored Alfred's devotion to duty.

"Anyway, I'd think you would be ashamed to let him see so plainly that you love him. Men don't care for girls that fling themselves openly. They despise 'em."

Stung as by a lash, Stella rose, and without a word stepped out on the floor with Gideon. In any garb

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he was a striking figure. To-night his faultless dress enhanced his Spanish grace, and joy softened his dark, inscrutable face. Since childhood the two had danced together. Even in the grim desert station Stella's father had often yielded to their coaxing, and tuned their measures on his old violin.

To-night, swaying and swinging as one to the languorous music of "The Beautiful Blue Danube," each rich in a differing beauty, they made a picture that compelled the attention of all. Other dancers dropped out and left them the floor, content to gaze at them. Round and round they whirled, Gideon in ecstasy, Stella oblivious, only her feet awake, her heart numb with shame. Was it true? Did Alfred despise her? Surely one little hour ago he had not! And how could she have known it was unwomanly to show her heart to him? Did he not love her? Had not his eyes, his actions, the very soul of him told her? No one had taught her concerning these matters; her father had never mentioned them. And there had been no woman—Oh, if she could have had her mother! With love's humility she magnified her own unworthiness and Alfred's superiority. She was not for him;—he had felt it, seen it.

She saw him enter and pause suddenly in the doorway, as Gideon whirled her on toward him. She caught the frank adoration in Alfred's eye as it rested on her, and the gleam of almost savage hostility as his gaze shifted for an instant to Gideon. Her heart leaped with quick relief. Gideon did not know. Alfred did love her, did not despise her, would—

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"Take me to my seat! Hurry, Gideon! I—"

The music stopped suddenly. Alfred was standing by Sally B., who was speaking. An unusual, solemn gentleness in her voice recalled Stella to her surroundings. Mrs. Sackett was dead! What did the people wish done with the money so generously given for her that night? Sally B. paused an instant, then went on a little unsteadily: "Will you have this you've paid in here go fur the pore woman's debts, an'—an'—fur the buryin'?"

Assent was quiet but hearty. They did not move at once. Each spoke a few sympathetic words to his neighbor. And Stella, half hidden by a green-wrapped post, poured her soul through her eyes over all the heads to Alfred's answering gaze.

Gideon watching, with Stella's fan in his hand, crushed it to a shapeless wreck of ivory and satin.

There was no more jollity. Admiring young eyes, regretful in the face of tragedy for the early close of their rare festival, watched as a sacred rite the unstringing and boxing of the instruments. Subdued, the people rose, the less bashful to clasp Sally B.'s hand in farewell, others wishing enviously for courage to do the same, yet passing out without venturing the conspicuous courtesy.

Soon all had stepped into the starry night; and the house slipped from merrymaking to dreamland.

CHAPTER XV

“'T IS BUT THY NAME THAT IS MY ENEMY”

ALFRED did not leave the dining-room, but seated himself in the screened niche that had hidden the water-cooler from the general gaze. He was glad to be out of the light, even the mild light of sputtering candles. He wished to think, to live over again some of the moments of the night. But the bustle of belated dancers and Sally B.'s hasty orders for his supper annoyed him, till Stella's voice was added to the hubbub, and he found himself straining to catch her every word.

“It's 'most ready, Stella,” he heard Sally B. say as a soft step came nearer. “Everybody's gone, and—look out fur yer silk trail! I've set a table in among them greens where you an' him play-acted; but the screen's in front so's nobody can see in the winder.”

“How dear you are!” he heard Stella reply.

“Huh! It's Yic that's dear. You bet Al Vincent's the only feller Yic'd make a kitchen fire for at three in the mornin'. Yic's stuck on Al; says he's 'all samee red button Chinaman.’”

Stella made a light movement before she spoke again. “Oh, what nice things to eat, and! linen napkins, hemstitched! And china! Where did you find it all?”

“Oh, them's some bits of high life I've kep' hid

“ ‘TIS BUT THY NAME ”

fur a spell. You kin make the tea soon's the water biles; an' take in the tray. I'm dead tired. Good-night."

"Oh, Mrs. Sally, you're going to stay, too, are n't you?"

"Lawsy! You don't want me. An' I want forty winks 'fore sun-up."

Alfred blessed her understanding heart.

"You're so good to me," Stella said, and the swish of her silken skirt as she crossed to Sally B. reached Alfred's ear.

"Shucks! Good for nuthin'! I ben young myself oncet."

An instant of silence followed, an audible kiss, and Sally B. tramped out of the room by a side door, while Stella descended to the kitchen.

Alfred was grateful for the stillness, glad that, for the moment, even Stella was unaware of his nearness. He would not speak till there was no danger of interruption.

Yic Wah came in and put out all the lights save the one in the screened corner of the stage. Alfred heard him leave the room and pass through the kitchen, giving Stella an elaborate good-night before he shut and locked the outer door.

With the grating of the key, and the assurance of no further intruding, Alfred slipped from the actual, the sordid, into the love-land his Romeo's dress recalled. The darkness was welcome. Not even yet would he call Stella. For a moment he would dream.

No need of lamp or candle; the resplendence of

THE IRON WAY

his visions illumined him. Though he had fasted many hours, hunger made no cry heard. The soul of him forgot time, place, fatigue. He slipped his long-time master, prudence, his pledges to perilous duties; forgot his lack of a name for the woman he loved, forgot all save Stella, his Star!

The song in his heart throbbed melodiously on, it seemed for hours; yet it was only minutes, and but a few, when the rustle of skirts, and a second light appearing behind the screen, aroused him. The rustling went and came again, and a faint tinkle of china struck his ear. Then he heard his name!

"Mr. Vincent!" softly; and after a breath, hesitatingly, "Romeo."

Alfred sprang out of his nook, but did not speak. There she stood, above him on the high stage, the light from behind the screen flaring sidewise upon her; next him the cheek he had longed to kiss in the play, but did not. A little pale she was now, yet so fair and sweet! Her lips were apart, her hand lifted as if to catch the sound of his coming. How beautiful she was! How sweet and womanly! And in the lonely darkness how near and intimate,—his own! his own!

She leaned forward a little, her draperies flowing softly about her feet behind the graceful stage-edging of fir tips, her dear, wistful eyes peering into the gloom. He knew she thought him out there somewhere in the dark; hungry, weary, waiting for her. He was not hungry, he was not weary; but he needed her,—she little knew how he needed her. And no matter how far asunder lay their future, to-night he would

“ ’TIS BUT THY NAME ”

have her, love her, accept the service of those dear hands.

Impulsively she called again, “Oh, Romeo, Romeo, won’t you come?”

The tender voice with the heartache in it thrilled him, chided his silence; startled him with apprehension also, lest the association of the name lead her to say those other too true words:

“ ’Tis but thy name that is my enemy.”

It should be her enemy no longer! “Here I am, Stella,—sweetheart!” He whispered the last word as he caught her down-reached hand and sprang up beside her.

As in a baby’s face fresh-waked from sleep, the warm color swept up, rose-tipped cheek and lip, veined the white lids, and paled off to the softly waving hair. Her eyes opened wide, frank and joy-flooded as a child’s. She turned to him. Doubts and questions fled. He was there! He had called her “Sweetheart!”

In the sheltered, spicy nook behind the screen, prudence, business, duty, all slept forgotten, while a nameless youth pledged life-long love and devotion to a dowerless, homeless, unworldly woman.

It was Stella, remembering his long fast, who cut short the precious moments, and lured Alfred from his love’s empyrean summits to his daily bread. She rearranged the dishes and went to the kitchen to make fresh tea, he following that no dear breath of her should be lost to him. Back to the table again they went, stepping lightly that they might wake no ear above; whispering, with gay little laughs suppressed with

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difficulty, lest eaves-dropping walls might hear and tell. Radiantly garbed, glowing, together they ate, the food ambrosia, the sequestered scene a rite, a pledge, prefiguring a home to be.

But duty entered with the gray dawn, a gray reflected in Alfred's face as he painfully told Stella something of his estrangement from his father, and of the forfeiture of his name; told her he must not marry till he could use it, yet knew not when that would be. Sensitive, proud, he sat with dejected head and twitching hands; and open-hearted Stella could but half guess what it cost him thus to bare, even to her, his reticent soul.

"I've known all the time I ought n't to love you, still less ought I to win your love; yet—yet—oh, Stella, I could n't help it!"

She regarded him earnestly, pityingly, a moment, her heart in her tender eyes; but he did not look up till she spoke. "Tell me, is it—is it any fault of your own that—?" She did not finish, but he understood.

"No." He paused uncertainly. "No, and yes. I cannot tell you freely—it is not all my secret. I am suffering for another's wrongdoing, yet I caused him to commit that wrong, unwittingly—God knows, unwittingly!" The last words were vehement; and he looked, not at Stella, but away, as if he addressed another auditor.

She slipped to her knees beside him, her clasped hands against his breast, her gaze probing his soul.

"Dear heart, suppose I were your sister, and her lover were in your place, would you not have her say,

“ ’T IS BUT THY NAME ”

as I am saying, ‘All my heart, my trust, my life, are yours, now and always’?”

Alfred lifted his head. Her fervent words beat back his fears. He took her hands in his own, steadily giving her look for look, his eyes reverently reading the soul she laid bare. “On my honor, Stella, yes; though I should pity her for the long, dreary waiting ahead of her.”

Stella sprang up, joy in her voice. “No waiting will be dreary when it is for you! Wherever you go I can think of you, see you. The world will be bright since you are in it, and my own. I’ll count off the days gayly, and — and make a little prayer for you each night.”

Her eyes shone. Her upturned face, her elation, lent her a lifted, lightly poised air, as if on the wings of her spirit she might cross land and sea to him. The lamplight had faded in the oncoming day; and now the first ray of the morning sun fell athwart her radiant face, struck the gold in her hair. An ethereal transparency pervaded her. To Alfred she was glorified, forever set apart.

He started toward her, yet halted speechless, half afraid of words, lest at sound of them she should vanish. Yet while those two gazed that silent instant, the sun swept his tremendous spaces and flashed a quick ray farther on to Alfred’s eye. It was the blow of the present! Time for Alfred had been annihilated, till that quick shaft shocked him to duty.

“Stella! The sun!” He lifted his hand for his watch; it was with his duty-garb. “Mr. Crocker’s

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special leaves at seven; I go on that. And there are reports to make, packing to do. I'm not to work for the Company—that is, openly. I'm to go on difficult errands, here and there. And I don't know when I'll see you again—Oh, my darling! I will not leave you!" His arms were outstretched to her, his voice throbbing with rebellion against parting.

She did not go to him, but smiled; and Alfred knew she would side with duty. "Ought you to go?" she asked gently. "And if you ought, will not going bring sooner the day when you may stay?"

"Already you are the better half of me," he answered tenderly, and followed the words with farewell.

CHAPTER XVI

SALLY B. LEADS THE WAGON TRAIN

BUSY nights made Sally B.'s risings no later. She served as good a breakfast to Mr. Crocker the next morning as if the hotel routine had been unbroken. If she felt surprise at Alfred's coming with valise and door key; or curiosity, when, instead of breakfast, he spent that too short moment with Stella in the lee of the stairway, Sally B. betrayed none of these emotions.

The little town was full of confusion, and the centre of it was the hotel. The dining-room was overflowing. Added to the crowd of the night was a gang of men just arrived, and clamoring for breakfast before they were hustled on to the Front. There was none of that expectant quiet of the supper hour in the green-embowered room. All indications of the magic moment when music and poetry ruled were swept away. The workaday world reigned again, driving its serfs with noisy haste. And Sally B., no longer the tropical bird of the ball-room, but a calico-gowned business woman, was everywhere, generaling the situation masterfully.

There was meagre time for dreaming, yet the heart of Stella dreamed on, though her head bent faithfully to its tasks at the office desk. The night in fairyland had passed, still its visions held. Across the gulch

THE IRON WAY

tender hands she knew were preparing the dead for burial; but often as her thoughts strayed there to death, stillness, mystery, she whipped herself back again to the bustle and hurry around her. This she could endure, float serenely over, with Alfred's eyes ever on her own, his kiss still thrilling her lips. Nor would she think of him as flying from her. Plenty of time to vision him far away, his mind occupied with alien concerns. Plenty of time to count off the days, the weeks—would it be months before she should see him? Perhaps. But to-day was still the day of all days; his presence still real; the touch of his hand, the sound of his voice, yet felt and heard. Often she bent her lips to the fragrant mountain lilies he had caught from a rocky crevice as he hurried in from the Front the night before; then turned again to the hour's work, work that could not conquer her castle-crowned Spanish demesne.

Before noon a man came in from the east with two wagons and a six-horse team, bringing a message for Sally B. It was an old newspaper, crumpled and dirty.

"Just look a' here!" Sally B. said excitedly, as she entered the office and held the paper out to Stella. "I got to go to Bill humpin' quick—termorrer, if I can git away. By goll! it'll beat the ole Harry for me to git ready!"

Stella took the unsavory paper and looked vainly for Sally B.'s message. The only noticeable thing was a string of crosses on the margin.

"Oh, I forgot. O' course, you can't read Bill's letter; nobody but me can. See them two crosses first

SALLY B. LEADS THE TRAIN

there? Close together? Them means he's well. See them four with lines over 'n' under? That says he's struck it rich. Blamed rich! Lines under'd mean pretty good; but lines on top, too, means whoppin'! Them three crosses standin' apart, them's grub. There's a dot over each; that's all kinds. There's a line under 'em; that means lots of it. Oh, Bill's hit a big lead this time, no doubt o' that; an' he's layin' out to work it on the jump, an' with all the men he kin git." She looked at Stella exultantly, but turned quickly back to the hieroglyphics. "Here's one big cross standin' alone; that's me; an' the line under it means 'come.'"

"What does the picture of a pen mean?" Stella asked, curiously.

Sally B. looked a little conscious. "Oh, you know, I kin read, an' make a fair stagger at writin'; so when Bill has any very important business that goes by way of ink I have to help him out."

Stella looked her interest, but was too absorbed in the queer information to speak of anything else. "That big circle at the end, what—"

Sally B. actually blushed, and interrupted hastily: "Oh, that's some o' Bill's nonsense! He's green enough ter think I'm—well, bang up, you know; an' that circle says a whole lot o' things to me, that you'll know all about when you have an ole husband that's your best feller all the time."

Stella's throat pinched. Would such a love ever be hers? "But how can you leave in this busy season?" she asked as soon as her voice came.

THE IRON WAY

"It's right smart pestersome, but I got ter. I got you, an' Vi, an' Yic. Grandma'am'll have ter—what's that word Al Vincent used the other day? shapper—shapperon you all."

Stella smiled half-heartedly. "Do you think we can manage?" She did not shrink from responsibility, but from the horde of men. Travellers, strangers, men of the town, all would make pretexts for lingering in the office, or wherever they could find either girl; not from rudeness, but because of the woman-hunger, the longing for all that a good woman stands for to men of the frontier. And Sally B. would not be there for refuge and court of appeal.

"Of course you can manage. You got to. Sabe? Don't get skeered 'fore you begin. I've got Jinny Dart staked out by telegraph. She's the best dinin'-room gal in Placer County. She'n Yic'll run the eatin' end O.K. All you got ter do, Stella, is to boss the whole consarn." Sally B. whisked off to make her preparations, which began with a telegraphed order for goods that kept several clerks in Sacramento busy all that afternoon.

Toward supper time the three women were in the "corral," where Sally B. had "put through" a tremendous cleaning. Dressed in an indigo-blue cotton gown and white apron, a red silk handkerchief wound turban-like over her hair, she looked the gypsy princess; yet she had worked hard enough that day for three ordinary women.

The room was long and bare, with rows of neat beds, an occasional chair, several rough tables, and a

SALLY B. LEADS THE TRAIN

forest of nails up-hanging various pieces of men's apparel.

"Now you'n Viola ain't to touch them beds, but just ha'nt that Chiny limb o' Satan, Wing, an' see 't he does 'em right. See them beds in the corner with Grandma'am's quilts on? They do cheer up the place a heap, don't they?"

The girls assented.

"If I get a clean feller in, that don't look as if he'd sleep with his boots on, I give him a Risin' Sun, or a Settin' Moon; most gen'ally a Settin' Moon, they don't show dirt quite so bad, an' they ain't nothin' to wash. Grandma'am makes 'em most as light as a sheet on purpose."

"But they only sleep with their boots on when they've drank too much; ain't that so, ma?" Viola asked, a bit anxiously. "Oh, dear! I hope nobody won't—will drink too much while you're gone."

There was a hint of worry in Sally B.'s face, but none in her words. "Don't you go an' hang out a red rag at trouble, honey. I'm goin' to make Shack Newbegin boss of the corral, an' he'll look out for any cuss that gits on a bender. He'll make him take leg bail too quick!"

Shackelford Newbegin had taken Gideon's place at the bar, and had proved exceptionally trustworthy.

"Doggone 'em! Some of 'em sleeps in their boots, drunk or sober," Sally B. continued, her mind still on the beds. She scowled reflectively, her neat soul outraged by memories of back-aching seasons of blanket-

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washing, of ceaseless strife to keep the corral from "smellin' wuss 'n a pig-pen!"

"When strangers wants beds, you two gals come together to show 'em up, an' have Wing bring up the carpet-bags."

"Why, ma? You always bring 'em up yourself."

"That's all right; but you mind. I ain't goin' to have you an' your teacher totin' baggage just 'cause I hain't got no style. You—"

"Oh! oh!" screamed Viola, jumping into the middle of a most dignified Rising Sun, as a mouse scudded across the floor.

Stella laughed. "Shall I call in a man with a gun, Viola? Think of your mother's courage—"

"Quit your hectorin' her!" Sally B. interrupted with a sharpness never before addressed to Stella. "I'm blamed glad she's woman 'nough to be skeered o' something. I don't want her like me; I want her soft, an' gentle, an' cuddly, like some o' them Eastern women that comes here on the stage. She hain't a-goin' ter live all her life like I have, with a gun in her hands, an' a Injun, white or red, a-lookin' down the barrel!"

Long Stella remembered the passion in Sally B.'s voice, the intense desire for better things than she had known, for her idolized child.

Only the stage took the road ahead of Sally B. the next day. "Do you think I'm goin' ter git mixed with Gid Ingram's outfit?" she asked when some one questioned her intention to lead. "If one o' them teams stalls, the whole procession is floored. No,

SALLY B. LEADS THE TRAIN

sirree! I got good wagons an' a good team; an' I'm goin' through on time, I am!"

The tarpaulin-covered wagons were drawn up in front of the hotel. Sally B. inspected everything with the eye of an old teamster,—harness, couplings, the adjustment of the load.

"Why, ma, you looked it all over before," Viola said, tagging her mother like a shadow.

"I know that; but accidents happens in busy times. Then them pesky hostlers might think it was funny ter fergit something 'cause I'm a woman. Men think theirselves so smart! That Shack 'lowed I did n't need any back-action with my load."

"Well, do you, ma?" Viola only asked to hear her mother vindicate herself before the admiring bystanders.

"Well, don't I? S'pose I'm goin' to use up yo' paw's fine stock a-puttin' all my load on one wagon? What did he send two wagons fur if I was n't ter use 'em? I'll work that back-action on all the heavy spots, an' git the load an' yo' paw's team inter Virginia ahead of Gid's teams, an' in good order. See if I don't!"

"You bet you will, ma!" Viola exclaimed with ardor and unusual slang.

The moment for starting came, and Sally B. turned to her lately arrived helper. "Jinny Dart, you do yo' prettiest fur the shebang an' I'll make ye glad," she said, and wheeled quickly to hug her dear "women folks." Viola she held in her arms for a silent moment.

"Take keer of her, Stella," she said softly, placing

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Viola's hand in her teacher's. "She's the hull world to me."

"I will, Mrs. Sally." Stella saw a tear on the dark cheek as Sally B. wrung her hand.

She was a picture as she climbed to the high seat and took up the lines, aptly as Uncle Billy himself. "Driver? What do I need of a driver? I've driv six— Golly! I wish I had a doller fur every mile I've driv six, the swing team a-buckin' sometimes like a fresh converted sinner agin Ole Nick."

She wore a short, dark woollen skirt, a calico waist, a white kerchief around her neck, and a man's felt hat. "It'll last better'n a woman's," she told the girls. Huge-wristed gauntlets made her hands look ridiculously small, as did the high-booted foot that swung out on the brake.

The sun had chased the mercury far above the hundred mark in shady nooks. On the porch the heat was intolerable. Yet the hotel people and town folk were gathered there to see Sally B. off, and Yic Wah had donned four satin coats in her honor.

"So long, Yic. You take keer o' them girls."

"You callee me Yic Wah, Sally B., I do him," he answered with a grin.

She laughed. The Chinaman would be more trustworthy than most white men she could have hired; she knew that. "All right, you ole bias-eyed stick-in-the-mud! Yic Wah goes. Ah Yic Wah! You run that kitchen good I bring you twenty dollar extra when I come back."

The cook salaamed with satisfaction at the pros-

SALLY B. LEADS THE TRAIN

pect, and at the unaccustomed "Ah," his title of dignity.

Sally B. loosed the brake a trifle, called to her leaders, waved a last good-bye, and was off down the hill. The load shook a little, and settled to its long haul, skyward as well as eastward. The tin watering buckets tinkled on the wagon-side. Chains rattled, side-boards creaked, tires cried against the new brake-blocks; and the clean tarpaulin over the low "back-action" reddened quickly with dust from wheels and hoofs. The horses, rested and fresh, snorted and tossed their heads, rattled their metal-buckled harness; and one of the swing team danced sidewise down the road and out of sight. Sally B. looked back frequently to see if her freight was riding safely; and at the last turn in sight, took off her hat and swung it to the girls and Grandma'am, yet watching from the hot porch.

The crowd soon melted away and left the three alone. Stella put her arms around Viola, and they stood so an instant, both forlorn, oppressed. Yet with one accord they remembered Grandma'am, and turned to help her back to her cool room. And in that service the homesick moment was conquered.

Ingram, Finn, and Gould's train soon began to move. Through the long afternoon, excitement, hurrying orders, smothered expletives filled the air, penetrating even to Grandma'am's room. One after another the teams pulled out, six mules, eight, ten, sometimes sixteen or eighteen animals. There were "back-actions," and "double back-actions"; mules

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and horses hitched together, and many teams of horses alone, while at the rear a few plodding oxen bent patiently to their slower journey.

Finn and Gould were in Sacramento and Idaho respectively. Gideon was train-master, and would shortly pass and precede the train to look out for its welfare on the way. Before riding off he sought Stella. She was unaware of the quick admiration he had inspired in her, till she divined it from his satisfied, eager gaze. In the old life he had been but a quick-tongued boy she could nearly always lead with her calmer will. He had left her that day on the hill a determined, passionate man, yet yielding to her still. But now he returned a conqueror. She felt it in every movement of his large body, in each word of his confident speech.

How had he in a few short months acquired such vast knowledge? His desert experience might have fitted him to manage teams; but how had he become a master of men? She could not realize that Gideon's purchase and lease of more than a third of the teams in the train carried the right of mastership; could not know how inherited executiveness, before dormant, had blossomed at the call of opportunity; that whatever dark blood flowed in his veins, it was still the blood of masters.

Stella was thankful that the bustle of previous hours had held him captive; that now she could plead her own preoccupation as reason for giving him but a moment.

"I know it, Little Star," he said in answer to her



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SALLY B. LEADS THE TRAIN

excuse. "But I'm coming back soon,—it will be to you, and for you, dear." He stopped to kiss her, but she pushed him away.

"No, no, Gideon! No man except my future husband shall —"

"And that is what I —" Gideon began passionately, when Jinny Dart came for orders for supper.

"I'll take good-bye and how-do-you-do both when I come again, Stella," Gideon said with significance. "I'm off!"

He closed the door behind him; yet the tyranny of his presence remained. Back of his simple words lay a power that gripped and held Stella to inaction. Not till the girl had twice spoken did Stella rouse to present duty. Even then her mind worked automatically, and she breathed calmly only after she had seen Gideon ride out of town on his prancing horse.

CHAPTER XVII

ONE MORE STEP UP THE SIERRAS

ON to Colfax! Fifty-four miles from Sacramento; yet miles short of the mountain fifty that must be finished, and accepted by the Government Commissioners before the interest on bonds would become payable; finished before the time limit expired, and with that, the franchise!

The September sun looked down on a new hive. The little terminus in the gulch had slipped into history in a night. Stables, shops, stores, saloons, shanty-homes were taken down in sections and moved on by flat car or prairie schooner.

Sally B., who gave Father Time's forelock many wrenches, was already installed in her rehabilitated hotel at Colfax, when the first excursion train whistled in, bringing officers and visitors to celebrate this one more step up the Sierras.

The town, named for the reigning idol of America, would always be a junction for the travel of Nevada and Grass Valley regions; and Sally B., taking note of this, rebuilt her hotel with a glance toward permanence. Proudly she led the Superintendent's niece, Miss Amabel Hamilton, to the best room, cloth-lined and gayly papered, the colors fighting gallantly but losingly with Grandma'am's "Dream of the Night" on the bed. Proudly Sally B. set her

UP THE SIERRAS

first banquet in the enlarged dining-room; and proudly Yic Wah in his new kitchen rose to undreamed-of culinary masterpieces.

"We can't have splitted canary birds, as they did at the big spread they give Schuyler Colfax in San Francisco," Sally B. explained; "but we got lickin' good victuals! Say! That was the worst low-down trick! So many o' them little yaller twitterers in the greens all over the big room, they drowned the band! Reg'lar bird heaven, they said it was. Then they tuck an' cooked every last one on 'em fur to eat afterwards! Injuns could n't beat that."

Alfred was attached to Mr. Crocker's party for the occasion, a sort of gentleman-in-waiting to Miss Hamilton. Yet during the bustle of arrival and adjustment to rooms, he found a quiet moment with Stella in Sally B.'s new parlor; and the long weeks of separation were forgotten in the space of a clock tick.

There was no time for leisurely reviews, confession of loneliness, and counter confession;—only a brief second with dreaded interruptions impending.

Alfred drew from his pocket a small parcel and broke its fastenings.

"Oh, a golden comb for gold-brown hair,
And milk-white pearls for a neck as fair;
And silver chains, and all for thee;
To-day our ship comes home from sea!"

he paraphrased gayly, throwing over her head a triple strand of Roman pearls.

"Oh, how delicate, and bonny!" Stella cried, slipping them through her fingers. "I never coveted

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anything in my life so much as Juliet's pearls that I wore that night,—except you," she added, looking up shyly.

"That's because they suit you, and—" The rest of his reply was inaudible.

"Here is the golden comb, two of them." He tucked them in her hair, trying them this way and that, with lingering touches on the wavy brightness. "The silver chains are lacking, not because our ship's a canoe, rather because I would n't let silver come near you. There's not a silver tint in your make-up. You're all creams and browns, with gold hinting everywhere, from your dear words to the little golden god that leaps in your eye when your heart beats high."

"Poetry!" she exclaimed laughingly; but hushed, for he had opened a tiny box.

"Diamonds are for you, dearest, if silver is not." He reached for her hand. "I'm sorry the gem is so small. Some day you shall have larger ones, and many, like my mother; and—" He stopped suddenly, for Stella's face was troubled; and she put her hand behind her. "Sweetheart! What's the matter?"

"Oh, my dear, I'm afraid of the ring!" she said tremulously.

"Why, Stella! What do you mean, dear heart? You take the pearls, and the combs." Alfred had easily fallen into the custom of the time and country in his purchase of jewelry for Stella.

"Oh, yes. But the ring opens the door to our heaven and lets the public in. Uncle Billy might give me ornaments or other things to wear; or

UP THE SIERRAS

Gideon might; but the ring—only you could give me that. And—they will—all know. I—”

“Are you ashamed of me, Stella?” he interrupted, his voice touched with sternness as well as with wounded feeling.

“No, no, no! But don’t you see? Women will nudge me, and ask when it is to be, and who is the ‘lucky man’; joke me unbearably. Men will, too. And you won’t be here to—to help me. Oh, don’t you see?” she pleaded.

He put the ring in the box. “Yes, I think I can see,” he said dully; “you wish no pledge between us.”

“Oh, Alfred, are you forgetting what we said that night when you were Romeo, I Juliet? Is there anything, any article in this whole round world that can hold our hearts closer?” She held out a timid hand. “I’d like to keep your ring, if I may, out of sight till—till—”

“Till we’re married? Then it won’t be an engagement ring!”

“Must others see it to make it an engagement ring?” She held up a slim finger. “The day you say, ‘Come,’ here it shall be. Till then, please tell no one.”

Alfred softened. He had been repelled by the eagerness with which some of the Western women he had met paraded that which Stella would screen with the curtains of her heart. There was real satisfaction in his face when he spoke again.

“I believe you’re right, mavourneen,” he said,

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tenderness returning. "Do as you wish with the little circlet."

She drew from beneath her collar a gold chain and locket. "My mother died before I can remember; this is her picture. Father gave it to me the day I was fifteen." She opened the case, disclosing a sweet face, and Alfred bent to look at it.

"You are like her, but larger, more—alive." He looked up quickly. "Your mother was—was—there's a heartache in her face."

"You see it, too?" she whispered. "I know father cherished her memory, yet he would never tell me of her, less of himself. And somehow I've always felt that she was very unhappy." Stella closed the case softly. "I love her dear face; and beside it your ring shall stay. Day and night I'll think of it, and of you. I'll call it a love-token, not a pledge, my—"

A rustle near the door banished the intimate moment. Alfred dropped her hand and lowered his tone. "Dearest, I can't control my time. Mr. Crocker has requested me—that's a command of course—to show Miss Hamilton about, amuse her till we return."

"We?" questioned Stella wistfully, dropping pearls and combs into her pocket.

"Yes; I go back to Sacramento with them tomorrow. To-day we are to go over some of the grading. You must go with us, though I shall have to pay more attention to—"

"Oh, no! Don't ask me. I'd rather stay—"

"Stella, I want you to meet these people, wish to

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have them know you. They are men you must know and meet often, if—if our hopes come true. Besides, Miss Hamilton is the only woman; the others are officials and capitalists Mr. Crocker is entertaining. It will be much pleasanter for her if you go. Will you?"

Stella hesitated. Not for the reason that Alfred had asked her to "play second fiddle," but because the vision of a small woman in neat travelling garb following Sally B. upstairs did not increase Stella's confidence in herself. A sudden feeling that she suspected was resentment astonished her. She found herself angry because this self-assured woman had invaded her own domain. She took herself sharply in hand. Was this the way she should treat Alfred? Refuse his every request? "I'll go because you wish it, Alfred," she said heartily.

Miss Hamilton entered, looking very trim and fit in her cool, blue linen gown, with hat, parasol, and furbelow in harmony. She acknowledged the introduction prettily, bowing gracefully and taking Stella's hand.

"Dear me, Miss Anthony! How do you manage that exquisite complexion in this heat and dust? And how can you look so sweetly serene living here, where everything is in such a jumble?" she rattled on after the first words of greeting were past.

Stella blushed at the glib compliments. She hated herself for doubting Miss Hamilton's sincerity, and replied hesitatingly.

Alfred came to her rescue. "We shall start in a

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few minutes. Will you be ready and join us here? We 'll wait for you."

"Oh, are you going out to view the iron track with us, Miss Anthony? How perfectly splendid! Get ready, quick, there's a dear."

The words were astonishing to Stella. Why did this stranger speak as if they had been friends for years? Stella shot a glance at Alfred, but he gave no sign of surprise. Miss Hamilton's social hyperbole was a commonplace to him, and he was heedless of Stella's mute call; for before she could reply, Miss Hamilton had settled herself near him, dextrously displaying more of her small, smartly booted foot and ankle than Stella thought was delicate, and was talking rapidly, exacting Alfred's entire attention.

In a vague, masculine way he tried to send Stella an encouraging glance; but he missed her eye as she stooped to gather up wrappings and boxes, and her wistful look from the doorway was unanswered because Miss Hamilton had impressed Alfred's eyes and fingers to her service.

"Dear me, Mr. Vincent! One of my shoe buttons is unfastened. Will you lend me your button-hook? Or perhaps you'll—" She put out her pretty foot.

Alfred was on his knee, back to Stella, when she closed the door. All the way upstairs she thought of the little scene below; speculated a little morbidly concerning the difference between Miss Hamilton's life and her own. Wide as was the gulf that separated Sally B. from herself, she knew the type Miss Hamilton represented was farther removed.

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Not with full trust did Stella array herself in solferino and scarlet splendors of toilet, her all; yet, having accepted the situation, she appeared a little later in the parlor, so calmly un-selfconscious that Miss Hamilton forgot the dress in admiration of the wearer. The coaches arrived, and they drove eastward on the stage road till they came opposite the selected spot, when they alighted and climbed to the higher railroad grade.

All was new to Miss Hamilton, and she entered into the spirit of the railroad enterprise with enthusiasm. And Stella, though alternately entertained by visiting gentlemen, found herself straining to catch every word spoken by the fascinating little woman in blue.

Miss Hamilton took the centre of the stage quite naturally. She wished to learn, took it for granted that Alfred would be a willing teacher. "Where in the world did you find enough men? How many have you, Mr. Vincent? A million?" She looked up bewitchingly; and Alfred was not impervious to the subtle flattery that for the moment invested him with the dignity of the owners and captains of the road.

He smiled. "We have just one two-hundred-and-fiftieth of that million, Miss Hamilton. We wish we had more. We're going to have more, if we have to steal them."

Miss Hamilton admired the confidence in his words.

"We've more than a thousand horses and carts; and a twenty-five-thousand-dollar order has just been placed for more stock and tools."

"Are men so hard to get?"

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"White men are. Chinamen less hard."

"Why don't you use more Chinamen, then?" she asked, glancing down from a rock that jutted into the path.

Stella, looking up at her from below, thought her very lovely, even fairy-like, embowered high above them in the green.

"They're afraid of drill and powder," Alfred replied to the question. And Stella saw the admiration in his eye, too, as he gazed upward.

"Afraid of gunpowder! A Chinaman!" Miss Hamilton laughed back at him, as he sprang up beside her.

Stella thought the laugh beautiful, so merry and many-toned, yet controlled.

"The Chinese afraid of powder!" the other girl repeated. "It's absurd! They celebrated gunpowder victories with sky-rockets long before William the Conqueror was out of baby dresses; no one knows how much earlier."

"Evidently our coolies are not descended from soldiers or powder-makers," Alfred returned; "but we're teaching them slowly. Could n't you contrive some Confucian arguments for us to use with them, Miss Hamilton?"

"Oh, one swallow, and summer; you know the rest," she replied merrily.

They were on the grade now, creeping around the shoulder of Cape Horn. Hundreds of feet above towered straight granite walls. Thousands of feet below, sheer and jagged, the walls met the foot of the

opposite mountain; and in the narrow, crooked crack at the bottom the American River seethed and tumbled its tortuous way to the ocean. The afternoon sun burned hot against the bare rock; but the other side was in shadow, its sombre chaparral robe picked out with pines.

As they came to a point where the stupendous scene opened fully before them, Miss Hamilton's gay chatter ceased. Men hushed their talk of stocks and bonds, purchase and sale. Stella, too, forgot the blood and flame in her attire, forgot even Alfred and his bright companion.

"This must be Ossa piled upon Pelion," Miss Hamilton said softly, breaking the long silence. She looked up, and below, trying to measure the dizzying depths.

"Whatever the giants undertook," Alfred replied, "they did n't move very much of Ossa."

"It's awful to look down there; it makes me dizzy." Miss Hamilton crept close to the hot rock wall.

"Take my arm, and look straight ahead, or up, Miss Hamilton," Alfred counselled. "I'll see that you don't fall." He drew her away from the wall, going himself so near the precipice that Stella took an involuntary step toward him, and blushed unnoticed for it. A curve brought them to shade.

"How ever did they get here first? And how did they dare insult that rock monarch with powder?" Miss Hamilton's gaze crept up, and up, to the sky-robed summit.

"With ropes. They let men down from the top,

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who picked out standing room; and from that they worked a narrow path around to the grade."

"Got plenty of engines, Crocker?" one of the visitors asked.

"Six engines and over a hundred cars," Mr. Crocker replied proudly, "and as many more ordered."

"That is n't a beginning to enough. You'll be dropping an engine or a car over into that gulch every day."

Miss Hamilton closed her eyes and shivered. "Oh, how terrifying!"

"Mr. Crocker forgot to mention our powder-car," Alfred added.

"Powder-car?" she repeated. "Surely Pluto and Proserpina will arrive together when powder rattles over this hot, rocky spot. Do you think it is so very far to—to—Tartarus?" she said.

"But you never heard of a powder-car like ours; it is iron-doored and rubber-tired," Alfred explained. "And we're surely deceiving their majesties of Hades, since the work at Summit tunnel goes on ceaselessly, eating our right of way six feet a day and night, through the heart of the Sierras."

"Oh, yes! Uncle Charley's very jubilant about that tunnel—indeed, about the splendid way all the work goes on."

"If we only had iron, iron! That's what hinders us. There is n't half enough to be had in the whole country."

"Why don't you buy abroad?"

"Our franchise forbids that; and American foundries

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can't make it fast enough. What we do buy is so long getting here! Twenty thousand miles! That's a sail for you. And the gales, and wrecks! By George! I wish it was quicker, and safer."

"But why is n't there iron enough in America?"

"The Government has impressed foundries and locomotive shops. Until national orders are filled, we must wait."

She pouted adorably. "And the Government will revoke your franchise if you fail! How mean! How unfair!"

As they neared the camps their conversation changed from railroad to other subjects—the latest book; the newest dance; the poem or picture most in the public eye. From topic to topic they flitted, up and down the polite world of their day.

To Stella, striving to lose no word, it was new, intoxicating. "That's my world, too," she thought. "I could say things like those. I know a little of mythology and history." She wondered why she had never used such language with Alfred, why he had not talked with her as he did now with Miss Hamilton. She could answer her own questions. She knew. They had both *lived* the things they discussed—dances, songs, travel. They knew living poets, had seen pictures in the making! They were kindred spirits, had been bred to Society's brilliant, flitting speech, knew her intricate customs and exacting law; had inherited all this with proud names and family jewels.

Stella lifted her head in a spirit of rebellion quite new to her. She could never acquire this subtle

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manner; and she should not stand in Alfred's way. He would succeed. From serving he would soon advance to ordering. He would need a wife like Miss Hamilton.

Mr. Crocker called Alfred for some questioning, and in his absence Miss Hamilton turned to Stella. "I'm afraid I'm monopolizing this opportunity, Miss Anthony. It's my first visit, you know."

"It is my first visit here, also," Stella replied.

"Your first?" Miss Hamilton's eyes opened wide with not too civil question. "Oh," she laughed, "if you live here and don't care enough to come and see these wonderful things I shan't let my conscience sit up nights over my monopoly of Mr. Vincent,—and the conversation." She turned to smile at Alfred reappearing, and Stella was without opportunity to explain that, despite enthusiasm and appreciation, the railroad grade was not a proper promenade for a girl alone.

The sun dropped redly over the crest of "Ossa," and "Pelion" blushed at his parting shaft, the river murmuring faintly through dusky autumn silences.

The young people lagged, in spite of the call of the leaders; and arrived at the camps to find them already alive with men and beasts.

"Oh, I must see the Chinese camps," Miss Hamilton cried. "I've heard of them."

They were in time to see the cooks serving from great cauldrons to each man, his little keeler full of boiling water. There was also an array of big black pots simmering over camp fires; yet white and

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savory messes were within, announced by attractive odors.

"What do they do with those little tubs?" Miss Hamilton asked as she saw the coolies disappear within tents or brush shacks.

"Each man takes a hot sponge bath and dresses in clean clothes before he eats."

"Is to-day any special occasion?" she questioned, wonderingly.

"They do that every night in the year. They never sup in their working clothes."

"What an example to Americans! My respect for the disciples of Confucius has risen to a hundred."

"I agree with you," Alfred rejoined. "The Company boards no Chinamen. They buy their own supplies, hire their own cooks, one for about every thirty men. And when water is distant, or must be carried uphill, this daily ablution becomes almost heroic."

"And think of the snow-storms!" She wished to stay to see the yellow men in "dinner dress," squatting with their little bowls and chop-sticks, chattering over their "lice"; but her uncle sent back a second hurrying summons that held a note of impatience; and Stella pushed ahead with sure steps, following her temporary escort. But Miss Hamilton, unused to rough going, and in spite of Alfred's watchfulness, turned her ankle, and arrived at the road, pale and weak with pain, leaning heavily on his arm. Yet her gay bravery deceived her uncle, though she clasped Stella's extended hand sharply as the two men lifted her into the coach.

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The visitors in front talked continuously; but the girls were quiet. And Stella, every sense alert, saw in the half-light Alfred's solicitous movements, heard a tenderness in his commonplace words he little dreamed he was betraying.

It was quite dark when they drove up into the hotel brilliance. Stella alighted after the others; yet she heard Miss Hamilton's graceful thanks to Alfred, saw the lingering handshake, the appeal in her eye, while she leaned upon her uncle's arm.

Sally B. came out to meet them; and the lantern swinging in the evening breeze threw fantastic, dancing shadows on the group. Suddenly Stella felt out of it all, remote; for Alfred, lifting his hat impressively, backed away from the open door, and did not see her standing in the shadow, alone.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LITTLE WOMAN IN BLUE

SALLY B.'s ready skill soon had the ankle rubbed to comparative ease. She prescribed bed; but

Miss Hamilton declared for the banquet even if she must be carried there, and gladly accepted Stella's offer of help with the dressing.

Miss Hamilton's lingerie was hardly less costly and dainty than my lady's of to-day. White silk hose and satin slippers; multiplied skirts more lace than cambric; the combination of lace and blue silk tissue that was the filmy little gown,—with careful hands Stella unpacked and laid them, a snowy heap, on the bed.

On the toilet table was a glittering array; the pretty jewel-case; the powder puff in its decorated receiver; silver cosmetic jar and cut-glass perfume flask; a vinaigrette whispering of East Indian mystery in its weird ornamentation; hand mirror, scissors, tweezers, and articles Stella had never seen before, all ivory-handled and delicately carved. There was a great variety of combs, brushes, odd hairpins, and ornaments; and curling tongs and spirit lamp, also new to Stella. Miss Hamilton wore a Japanese silk kimona, reaching to her sandalled feet. Stella's fascinated gaze clung to the huge flying storks and the Sacred Mountain embroidered on the bright blue silk, till she felt

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dizzy, felt as if she had been whisked away to the very heart of the far, secret empire. In the costly furnishings of her childhood home there had been no feminine niceties. Gowns and their accessories, ordered wholesale by her miner father, had never included such dainty outfitting as any sophisticated girl with a fat pocket-book might possess; and Amabel Hamilton, daughter of refined and prosperous parents, had taste as well as money.

Patiently Stella stood by, handing pin or comb; or heating the iron and watching the fine light hair rolled, puffed, and pinned into the hard, ugly fashion of the time.

"I shouldn't think you'd like to use an iron. Won't it spoil your hair? It's so soft and pretty, it would be a shame."

"Oh, what's hair for?" the other questioned as she curled the short locks about brow and neck. "The only harm is an occasional burn; and it will grow again. Anyway, I'll not give up the iron as long as the style is as stiff and horrid as it is now," she went on, while combing the hot ringlets into a wavy fluff. And Stella had to acknowledge that the result was bewitching.

The toilet went slowly. Stella had been taught a decent respect for the human body; and her innate love of beauty and order had blossomed into an honest personal neatness. But such complicated hair-dressing, such caressing of eyebrow and lash; such critical attention to hands and nails; the bathing, hot and cold; the rubbing and patting of cheek

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and arm, before lotion, powder, and a wee touch of rouge went on; the examinations at each stage with hand glass and mirror, Stella holding one of the lamps which she continually adjusted to new angles of reflection,—this was an amazing revelation to her of Eve-old feminine adoration at the altar of self-adornment.

A rap at the door, and the hearty voice of Mr. Crocker called from without: "How's the ankle, Amabel? How soon will you be ready?"

"Better, thank you, Uncle Charley. You may come for me in five minutes. I can do by myself now," she continued to Stella as her uncle walked down the hall. "It's splendidly kind of you to help me, and so beautifully. If you ever need work I can get you a position as lady's maid. I'll give you a fetching character."

Stella winced, yet chided herself for it. She knew Miss Hamilton was only "in fun." Still, how could this delicately reared city girl believe such a big, awkward creature as herself capable of filling any but a menial position? The real unkindness for which Miss Hamilton failed to apologize, the scant minutes she had left Stella for her own toilet, went unnoticed; for Stella was too generous a giver to count the cost of her givings.

Miss Hamilton was clasping her necklace of garnets as Stella left the room. She wondered why she was glad they were not pearls.

In her own room she smiled to herself while she quickly made ready, coiling as usual her thick waving

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hair, but adding her "golden combs"; slipping hurriedly into her simple white gown and its simpler accompaniments. At least, she would be rid of the battle of colors she had carried that afternoon. Hair, eyes, cheek, and the creamy smoothness of neck and chin were richly tinted enough to compensate for all lack of color in dress; yet as Stella, blushing, clasped her pearls about her neck, and turned for a last glimpse before her little mirror, the unskilful cut, the bare, cheap look of her gown, struck her as never before. Long had she refused to follow the Western custom that permitted a young man to include a "party dress" with his invitation; and this plain frock which she had made herself was a reaction from the furbelowed atrocities in color and fabric that too often appeared at party and picnic.

A cluster of tiger lilies, an offering from flower-loving Yic Wah, caught her eye. She pinned them on her breast, and hastened downstairs, meeting Sally B. and Viola in the hall.

"Oh, here you be! What made you so late? I was jest comin' fur you. I see they 've reserved a seat on both sides o' Al Vincent's. One 's fur you, I reckon. I 'm settin' third from Charley Crocker,— big bugs is next to him,— an'— Cut my shoestrings! You look splendiferous!" she exclaimed as they came under the lamp.

"Don't she, ma?" echoed Viola, heartily.

"Say, honey, them tiger lilies suits you; an' I 'd never 'a' thought it. They got colors in 'em like yo' hair an' eyes, shore 's yo're born. Then they're

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kinder secret an' powerful lookin', like they could do things to all the other flowers."

"What an odd idea!" Stella said wonderingly.

"Is it? Well, nobody won't git their secrets a-studyin' of their looks; no more will they your'n, Stella. Your face gits secreter an' eleganter every day." Sally B. never paused for a word. It might not be the right one, but her meaning carried, as the message of the master in spite of poor instrument and blundering fingers.

The band was playing as they entered.

Stella's quick eye noted with sudden aversion the three reserved chairs, and the absence of Alfred and Miss Hamilton. "Let me sit on this side with you and Viola, won't you, Mrs. Sally?" she asked softly.

"But there's no seat on this side, chicken." Sally B.'s whisper was far audible.

A gentleman rose at once and offered his arm, which Stella accepted to save further confusion. She was rosy with embarrassment, though no other hint of it showed in her stately walk around the long table. And Sally B. watched delightedly the following of admiring eyes.

Stella was hardly seated when Miss Hamilton entered, leaning on Alfred's arm in the dependent style of the time. Stella wondered why they should be the late ones, since Miss Hamilton had been ready long before, and Alfred was always prompt. Simple Stella! Had she known, she could not have understood the motive that sent Alfred on a fruitless quest for a certain sort of lozenge Miss Hamilton had all at once

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found necessary. Yet whatever the cause, Stella saw the fine effect of the late entrance, the result of cunning tarrying.

Miss Hamilton had timed her coming to that awkward instant common to banquets, when all await some incomprehensible delay, and when any diversion is welcome. The two walked slowly down the long room, Miss Hamilton's step and movements so perfectly artful that they seemed artless,— young women were so trained then. She limped ever so slightly; yet she was speaking in subdued tones and smiling into Alfred's face, as if they two had just alighted from paradise, and were the first souls on this dark planet.

A hum of admiration went round. Stella had not before seen Alfred in evening dress. The night he wore Romeo's velvet and laces he was more splendid; but this conventional dress, finely displaying his slim figure, belonged to a world she knew not. She noticed proudly that he wore his clothes with an accustomed ease, saw also that he was the only man in the room who could fitly escort the dainty woman who floated by his side, a summer cloud in her filmy white draperies.

Miss Hamilton seated herself demurely and exchanged salutations with the gentleman at her right. Alfred seized that moment for a word with Stella.

"Why did n't you wait for us? I have n't your permission to mention our engagement, but I wish Miss Amabel to suspect it. Yet you make it impossible, Stella."

She thought of herself entering beside that perfect

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pair and was deeply grateful to the chance that prevented it. She noticed Alfred's use of Miss Hamilton's given name, and the omission of his usual endearment to herself, and because she was hurt she dared not be serious. "Do let her think the coast clear; it will be such a fine test of your constancy," she said with a flippancy astonishing to him.

He was too thoroughly masculine to fathom the art a woman uses to hide her wound. Neither could he reply, for Miss Hamilton turned to him with some laughing remark, finishing with a French phrase.

"Oh, pardon me, Miss Anthony. You speak French, don't you? Mr. Vincent thinks you know everything; you must know that, of course."

"I'm sorry Mr. Vincent has so little penetration," Stella replied, adroitly leaving the question unanswered. "If he should so too greatly estimate you, your wings would be already visible to him." She smiled inscrutably, and turned to her left-hand neighbor with a remark about the table.

"By George! That was neatly turned," Alfred exclaimed under his breath, realizing for the first time, and with surprise, that subtlety was possible to Stella.

At Stella's words the man gave her a startled look, and hastily crumpled some loose sheets of paper in his hand. "I—er—er—I beg pardon. What did you say? Really—I'm to respond to a toast, you know, and I'm—er—" He huddled limply in his chair and toyed uncertainly with the cutlery.

"Oh, don't let me interrupt your thoughts, Mr.

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Domley," Stella said sympathetically. "It must be so trying to speak at a place like this."

He looked up quickly. "It's tremendously good of you to say that. Every one else laughs at me, — thinks I'm humbugging. I'm not; I'm always nearly dead with worry."

"What makes you do it, then?" she asked.

"Why, because — because I'm a fool, I guess." He looked at her with a question in his eye she could not read.

"What is your topic?" she asked after a pause, seeing that he expected her to speak.

"'The Future of the Pacific Railroad' is what they've assigned me; but they really mean 'Woman.' I always talk about her. I'm unmarried, you know."

"Of all strange things! How foolish to waste time on 'Woman,' when all are met here to discuss the railroad!"

"No, not foolish. That toast is always in order. But I can't do it justice, I never shall; yet they always give it to me. At least, it's the only topic I speak on, and they all know it. I'm not versatile."

"I'm sure you're versatile enough, and will do your subject justice when your time comes. Don't think about 'Woman,' any more. Let's eat some supper. You have n't begun yet."

"By Jove! I will stop thinking about 'Woman,' and pay attention to *a* woman. You're positively comforting!" He smiled frankly, and Stella recovered some degree of serenity.

The insistent band, undaunted by two partitions,

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blared the popular airs of the day; sentiment, frolic, pathos: "When This Cruel War is Over," "Ever of Thee," "The Maiden's Prayer," "Champagne Charley," "Last Ditch Polka," the last two accompanied by a soft tapping all along under the table.

Sally B. sat opposite Stella, her eyes seemingly on all the waiters at once, yet she found time for the guests and their conversation. Her black pomaded hair was rolled hard and shining over a colony of "rats" and "mice" that doubled the size of her head. Her gown, sent from one of Sacramento's best shops, was irreproachable in style and color. But the days of successful fitting by measure only had not then arrived; and Sally B. lacked forty pounds of filling her frock.

Viola was lovely in a dress of her own choosing. She did not flush under excitement, but paled; and to-night her lustrous, earnest eyes, soft dark hair falling in curls to her waist, thoughtful brow and delicately curved, childish lips smiling above her strong little chin, made a beautiful picture. Stella, looking at her pure face rising from a hazy cloud of pale tissue, could think of nothing but Psyche just awakening.

Fruits, flowers, and wines had come from Sacramento with the Chinese waiters; but the substantial viands were Yic Wah's own triumphs. Stella could see him frequently passing the door, superintending the serving of the table, and bulging with many-colored satin splendors and importance.

A slight commotion at the door arrested the attention of the guests. There came a gust of subdued yet excited Chinese chatter, a pause, and the entrance of

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two men carrying a towering white pagoda, surmounted by the word "God," in huge gilt letters. With some difficulty the sugary structure was safely landed in the centre of the table, and Yic Wah and his assistants withdrew to the cover of the doorway, where Stella saw the cook peeping expectantly through. It was his master tribute to the occasion.

An instant of silence followed; then an infectious snicker ran round the table, in spots breaking into an actual laugh.

Stella saw Yic Wah's eyes open wide with astonishment and question; yet in a breath they gleamed with anger. His face went livid, and he hurried away.

But Sally B. saved the moment. "My cook set up all night to make that cake, Mr. Crocker; please don't laugh!" she whispered past the two intervening guests.

At once the host rose, and taking his cue from her anxious face, proposed a toast to "The Cake and the Cook," that was responded to with hearty cheers. Yic Wah entered, bowed, and retired with a beaming face.

The toastmaster now rapped for order. The conversation and laughter ceased, the soft rustle of serving and eating hushed, and the speeches began.

Mr. Crocker spoke first, to the general topic: "The Railroad." He told the story of its inception and progress, paying tribute to Theodore T. Judah, to the men who furthered the undertaking in Congress and Legislature, to all the officers, especially to Mr. Gregory; and closed with a neat compliment to Alfred. Stella ever so gently pressed his arm with her own;

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but the woman on the other side smiled alluringly into his face, and pouted at her uncle.

"Uncle Charley did n't say half enough about you," she whispered, yet Stella heard it.

"I shall tell him he has left his debt of gratitude for me to liquidate," the beauty continued. "Or—or can I pay Uncle Charley's scores?" she questioned in mock humility, leaning toward Alfred till her breath brushed his cheek. "Perhaps my coin is not current in your market."

Of course, he had to meet her badinage. She meant her coin should be current with him, and above par; and he would have been ice had he entirely escaped the spell of her witcheries.

Several speeches followed, among them Mr. Ludlow's memorable toast, "The Pacific Railroad, the beautiful belt of the Union, with California as the golden buckle."

"There's Ludlow ahead of me," complained Mr. Domley to Stella. "What can I say after him? He sweats eloquence at every pore."

"If you confine yours to your tongue I think you'll have the more condensed article," Stella replied with a cheerful smile.

"God bless you! Do you know you've starched my spine wonderfully? Perhaps I shall say something, after all. It's to your credit if I do. Here! You may hold my notes if you'll be so good. It's coming. I feel it, don't you? Ludlow's rising to his finish!"

The toast was called. Mr. Domley rose; and

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Stella was amazed as she saw his form take on poise, and his face lose its pained look and mantle with self-possessed good humor. Around the table men nudged one another, and settled back in pleased expectancy. He began in a low-pitched, silvery voice; and the listeners sat, self-forgetting, entranced by his whimsical, musical fun.

“‘The Future of the Pacific Railroad.’ I don’t quite catch the meaning of this strange name the toastmaster has given my subject. But she’s sweet with any name, is Woman.” He looked about impressively, and held his glass high.

“To Woman! To her virtue we give love; to her beauty admiration. There’s nothing new under the sun—but Woman! She’s ever new, never old. There are not a pair of her, nor ever three of a kind; yet she’s a full hand every time!

“There’s nothing new under the sun but Woman; yet all that man ever can say about her man has said. And I throw the gauntlet to those who cry ‘Plagiarism!’ You ask what Woman has to do with the Pacific Railroad? Everything! Doesn’t Woman make the home? Don’t homes make the nation? Doesn’t Uncle Sam protect his nation? And doesn’t he need this railroad to do it? What are Mr. Crocker and Governor Stanford, Mark Hopkins and Collis P. Huntington, working twenty-five hours a day for? I’ll whisper the secret to you, but you must n’t breathe it! For Woman!

“Could you *build* this railroad without Woman? Where under the canopy would it get to without

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Sally B.? Where would be your banquets, your square meals three times a day?

"Woman, the consoler of our sorrows! Of course she is! Why, Mr. Toastmaster, you will never know the debt of gratitude you owe to this beautiful Thalia at my side, who has sustained me through the birth pangs of this immortal speech. Drink to her! And to my fair farther neighbor, to Mrs. Sally B. and her daughter!" He bowed gallantly to each.

"America is bounded on the north by the Aurora Borealis, on the east by the Atlantic Ocean, on the south by manifest destiny, and on the west by the Chinese Empire; and Woman dominates the whole of it. What's that, Mr. Crocker? Pacific Ocean on the west? Why, did n't Sam Brannan annex the Sandwich Islands to build his marvellous coral palace in? Was n't that manifest destiny providing more room for American women? What are you building your railroad for, anyway? For commerce? Incidentally, perhaps. For national protection? Maybe, when Uncle Sam gets around to remembering us. For international travel? Sometimes. But above and beyond all these is the supreme reason,—you are building this railroad to carry women, to found homes in the great West. God bless them!

"These are momentous days, Mr. Toastmaster. Go on with your grand fight against rock and snow and Old Nick and Louis McLane. I'm with you, heart and soul! And when you've finished 'the beautiful belt of the Union,' and have added its 'golden buckle,' remember it zones Woman! Woman

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as womankind, God's masterpiece! American womanhood, the halo to our Star of Destiny! *The* woman, our mother, sweetheart, wife! Drink to her standing!"

The roar was deafening. And in its confusion, and the scraping of chairs, Stella recovered from her embarrassment. Yet through it all a sixth sense reported faithfully the progress of Amabel Hamilton's allurements. At the close of the banquet Stella escaped through a door; and from cover of darkness watched knots of men gather and dissolve about Miss Hamilton; marked her every motion and speech; noted her vivacity, her perfect grace, her quick smile; saw flattered Alfred's ready response as she appealed to him prettily for fact, or corroboration of her own assertions. The little court melted away at last. Mr. Crocker was buttonholed by Mr. Gregory and led off. Viola disappeared; and Sally B. was already rushing the transformation that must precede the five o'clock breakfast.

When the radiant two were alone Stella saw Miss Hamilton's animation fade in a breath; saw her pale and tremble, and lift a pathetic little face to Alfred. And Stella marvelled at the heroism that had kept the girl keyed so long to her role. However artificial Miss Hamilton's manner might have been before, Stella recognized the significance of the dropped mask. Here was perfect honesty, and the sweet appeal of pain courageously borne. How could Alfred resist it, or her trust in him, her beauty, all the subtle intimacy of the moment?

"Oh, Mr. Vincent, I've nearly died this last hour,"

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she said unsteadily. "Won't you please find Uncle Charley as soon as you can?"

He made some quiet reply Stella did not hear, and hastened to the door, returning quickly to say that Mr. Crocker had gone with Mr. Gregory, no one knew where. "You must let me carry you to your room. Sally B.—"

"Oh, no! I'm too heavy! I'm such a big girl!" Miss Hamilton interrupted, looking up at him with tired, appealing eyes. Stella, thinking of her own largeness, felt this last sentence to be sheer affectation.

For answer, Alfred gathered her easily in his arms, and Stella recognized the quiet authority in his voice. "You cannot stay here. I'll carry you gently. Don't worry, you're only a fairy weight. I'll call Miss Anthony—"

Stella had seen the delicate face settle against his shoulder, had felt the solicitude in his tones. They came toward her, and the gleam of a lamp fell full on their faces as the sound of her own name startled her. She shrank as from a blow, and fled to her room. And when Alfred knocked later she made no response, though to Sally B.'s anxious inquiry, following soon, she sent a cheery reply. Yet there was no sleep for her in those early morning hours; she was fighting a battle that would change her life.

She did not leave her room till late, giving herself barely time to go to the station, where she arrived just as Miss Hamilton was being lifted in a chair to the platform of the rear car. Stella adroitly avoided Alfred's attempt at a private moment. There was no

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rancor in her serene face, her cheerful speech. She met his look squarely. And he approved of the fine dignity with which she received Miss Hamilton's extravagant compliments, the invitation to her home, and her voluble good-bye. Yet when Stella put her hand in his in farewell, though she smiled, and her words were all he could expect, there seemed an adamant wall between them that had been builded in a night. The frank girl he loved had changed places with a baffling, inscrutable woman. And Alfred realized that henceforth there might be chambers in her heart forever closed to him.

As the train started Stella heard Miss Hamilton speak to Alfred and repeat her words when he made no reply; his ear and eye were lingering intently on herself. Yet Miss Hamilton won his attention finally; and Stella's last vision, as the train curved out of sight, revealed him bending courteously over the city girl's upturned face.

CHAPTER XIX

ALFRED PAYS THE FIDDLER

CLARIFYING daylight had not brought Alfred an easy conscience the morning after the banquet. The spell of the fair sprite he had held in his arms the night before had been broken with the setting of the lop-sided moon. And Stella, standing on the railroad platform, wise in staying away from him till that moment, strong in her resolve which he could feel but not define,—it needed but this attitude to recall the ardor of his love for her, more insistent as she grew more remote. In the days and correspondence that followed, Alfred suffered as does a mother when, through her own sin or ignorance, she loses infallibility in the eyes of her child. He knew that he alone had opened their paradise to the tempter, had laid bare to Stella's unworldly eyes his own weakness.

The ordinary coquette found him fascinating because invulnerable. But Amabel Hamilton was no ordinary coquette. Beautiful, intuitive, and with a natural love for the game, she yet pursued it not as a business, rather as a tentative search for Prince Charming, a preparation for a lifelong hold upon his allegiance. And Alfred came nearer her ideal than any other she had ever met.

Alfred wrote at great length to Stella, making a bad

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matter worse by his too ardent defence of Amabel, and by self-condemnation that did not ring quite true. The reply to this letter disclosed to him a hitherto unknown Stella.

More than a second time he read it. He knew now that he could never deceive her. She would always know his inmost heart. She might uncomplainingly bear neglect after marriage, coldness; but she would never forgive him if he married her with less than the whole of his love.

He knew this was a larger, nobler woman he had discovered; one who would always give more than half. Yet he recalled the subtle flattery of her previous attitude, when his aims had been hers, his wisdom her guide. And as a mother, with all her pride in her son's growing manhood, still yearns at times for her little boy, so Alfred could not help somewhat regretting Stella's blind trust in him which his own conduct had destroyed forever.

There came to his mind the lonely desert station, the glittering, blue-black welkin, the vast darkness, the lurid lights, the shrieking mules, and Stella, tender, pitying Stella, heating the branding irons. Yes, her love would ever greatly forbear with him; but for herself, she would never shrink from the branding iron of duty.

The middle of October found Alfred in Placerville, where he had been sent to purchase for the Company a large amount of fish-joint iron originally bought for the Placerville Road. When the river end of this road, the Sacramento Valley Road, fell into Central

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Pacific hands, iron was no longer useful to the defunct San Francisco and Washoe, which was to have taken over all track to Placerville. Yet, "Anything to beat the Central Pacific" was still the cry; and Alfred had need of all his discretion; for the opposition would never knowingly sell rails to the Central Pacific Company.

"I have a delicate errand here," he wrote toward the close of a long letter to Stella, "that I may not tell you of further than to say I am making as much haste as possible. I hope to be one of the passengers to Virginia City on the day the Placerville Stage Company has set to 'snow under' the Dutch Flat and Donner Lake Stage Company's schedule. If so, I shall complete my business there and be with you two days later. I'll telegraph the day I leave Virginia.

"By the way, Cadwallader is here, ostensibly looking up laborers, which is about all the Company gives him to do lately. He is very cordial, and claims to know of a secret 'big deal'; a mine in Nevada, that he wishes me to join him in exploiting. I'm suspicious of his schemes; yet he has some good men with him, and I may look it up.

"But here is the cream of my letter for you, dear,—for us. I am to have a handsome percentage of any money that I can save the Company in this enterprise now pending. If the business goes as it promises, the day when I may say 'Come' will be a long leap nearer."

Closing words were penned from a flood of tenderness that carried over mountain and vale, and were still warm on the page when they met Stella's eye.

CHAPTER XX

AMBITION CHALLENGES LOVE

IN her favorite hillside nook, wrapped about with the fruity fragrance of autumn, Stella read and re-read Alfred's letter, and mused upon the vague plans for the future that now occupied her mind. Nothing definite had come to her; but her growing determination to improve herself was augmented by a tormenting vision of a little woman in blue, light and dainty, where she herself was heavy; vivacious and quick, where she was slow; charming, where she was dull. Stella wished she were small, delicate, timid—a hundred things she was not; yet she was sensible enough to know that assuming them would be folly. For underlying all her vain wishes was a recognition of something within, a dim vision of the power of her own soul, that brought tranquillity, and courage for her difficult venture.

The declining sun shot a level ray into her retreat before she realized the hour and the call of duty. Long before she reached the hotel, Alvin's cheerful voice floated up in one of his jocund songs.

Stella sighed. In a few days Alvin's bright face would be out of her life. He had been promoted from Colfax to the Sacramento office, and was now awaiting his successor. Yet the sight of him carried

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her thought swiftly to the telegram from Gideon he had that morning brought her.

The message was brief. Gideon was coming for her! He had not heeded her negative-laden letters. She had not disclosed her engagement; she had been afraid. And there was reason for fear. The gossip concerning Alfred that floated from tongue to tongue did not escape her sensitive ears. It was said that he was in love with the Superintendent's niece; again, that he cared nothing for her, only for the position he might, as her husband, command; that he was just Charley Crocker's safety-valve, and had to "blow off" whenever ordered; and more as false. Gideon must hear all this. Stella knew it would confirm his belief that Alfred had no love for her, and that she must meet Gideon, tell him, defy him. It would be a battle of wills, and Gideon would be defeated; but at what cost? What cost to him, to herself, to Alfred? Fear gripped her at thought of the time when the two men should face each other.

In the parlor she found Sally B., Alvin, and Viola, in an excited, triangular discussion; Alvin pleading, Sally B. stern, Viola in tears.

"Oh, Miss Stella," Alvin cried appealingly as she entered, "do you think a feller that's all straight but one leg the Lord himself put a crook in ought to be tipped the cold shoulder for that?"

"Boy! 'T ain't that!" Sally B. said sharply before Stella could speak. "If you had a home, an' money, an' could give Vi some place in the world—"

"You bet I'll never ask you to give her up,

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ma'am, till I have a home for her," Alvin broke in impetuously; "a number one home, too!"

"But, Al, that's turrible fur off. How in thunder kin you do it?"

Sally B.'s heart warmed to the pluck of him, in spite of her determination.

"Do it? I'll just inch along, a little every day, same's I have been doing. I got three hundred saved already, an' on interest; and it'll grow faster all the time. Ma, she helps a lot, too. I'm going to night school in Sacramento; and when I ask you for Vi I'll be no Greaser. I can't go on my shape, but I'll make what brains I got stretch like blazes!" His face was eloquent, but Sally B. would not look at him.

Instead she gazed at Viola, all the mother's pent pride shining in her eyes. "Oh, Vi," she said, after a pause that was broken only by the buzz of an uneasy autumn fly on the window, "I've staked a hull mountain o' hopes on you. I ain't never thought o' you separate from me, some way. I—"

She stopped, and Viola spoke with some spirit in spite of her sobs. "But, Ma, you expect me to wear a Mrs. in front of my name some day, don't you? And Mrs.—Mrs. Carter," she blushed and smiled through her tears, though her gaze shifted to the window, "Mrs. Carter's just as good as Mrs. Bernard, ain't it?"

The mother glanced furtively at Alvin, whose heart spoke naively in his adoring eyes fixed on Viola's downcast face. The boy had won Sally B.'s approbation, yet she could not relinquish her dream. "If

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yore brothers had 'a lived, Vi," she went on slowly, "I might 'a considered of this. But yo're all yo' paw an' me's got to bank on. We're goin' to be rich some day, an' Bernard 'll be a name to conjure with; an' yo're all we got to do it proud."

"Oh, Ma, we're always just going to be rich. It may be a thousand years!" There was a heart-break in Viola's voice that touched Stella's sympathy.

"They're so young, Mrs. Sally; it'll be years before they can marry, and they may not care for each other when the time comes. Why not—" She stopped, for Alvin was frowning, Viola had started forward, and Sally B. straightened proudly.

"You don't know the Bernard an' Lang stock," the mother said sternly. "Vi may look a slip of a girl, but her word 's as good as her paw's; an' what she promises now she'll keep always."

Stella quailed a bit before the austere woman. Viola seemed such a child Stella could not take her as seriously as her mother did. But she hastened to mend her unfortunate words. "Oh, Mrs. Sally, I know Viola 's true; but I meant this. They're too young to marry now; why not let them write, see each other when possible, and let marriage drop out of the case till Alvin has his home to offer, and Viola has seen more of life? Then Alvin can ask for her again."

Alvin peered eagerly into the older woman's face, waiting her slow reply. When it came the two young things hung breathlessly on each word, their faces growing dull with despair as the fateful sentence fell.

"Vi, yo're yo' paw's child 's well as mine. I ain't

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got no right to settle this question without his havin' a say. An' you all might's well know it now's later,—yo' paw's made his pile. It's on the sly yet, so lock yer lips. We're goin' to pull up stakes pretty soon an' git to the Bay. An' we'll flame out, an' ride on the gilt edge o' society a while, an' see how that feels. How on airth are two ole duffers like yo' paw an' me goin' to show off without you, Vi?"

"I don't want to show off, Ma," Viola said, pitifully.

"I've slaved all my life waitin' fur the chance to live like white folks; an' now it's come, are you goin' to spoil it all, honey?" She held out her hand, and her voice trembled.

Viola looked up suddenly, wonderingly, to see tears in her mother's eyes. She was accustomed to her mother's fiery sympathy for others; but this was the first time she had ever heard her plead for herself. A fleeting, hopeless look the child sent Alvin, then crossed the room and took her mother's hand in both her own. "Good-bye, Alvin," she said, piteously. "She was my mother before you were my lover; and I must stick to her—and Paw." She flung herself into Sally B.'s arms, and the two sobbed together.

For an instant Alvin stood petrified, then straightened to a new manliness. "Mrs. Bernard, you've no right to require such a sacrifice of us. We only asked you to let us be honest with you about our love for each other. I'm not the kind to forget, and neither is Vi. I'm going to win that home, and a bank

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account; and then I'm coming for Vi. If we can't marry with your consent, by that time the law of California will let us do it without." He turned to Viola, who had gone to the window. "Good-bye, Vi," he said slowly, looking at her yearningly, though he took no step toward her. "You'll hear from me as soon as I'm ready to build that house. Have your plans drawn and ready, my girl, for it won't be so very long."

There was nothing defiant in his manner, for all of the fearless ring of the words. Stella could have hugged him for the cheer, the hope, the manhood in voice and face. He gave Viola one last look, glanced furtively at Sally B., smiled at Stella a smile sadder than tears, and closed the door behind him. In a moment his cheerful whistle came back to them, and the stump, stump of his crutch.

CHAPTER XXI

INTO THE NIGHT

"**H**OWDY, honey," Uncle Billy said to Stella that evening as he came in and took his supper-seat at the table, where Sally B. proudly included him in her elastic family circle. "Are you ready fo' the race?"

"Oh, Uncle Billy, are we really going to race the Placerville Stage Company to Virginia City? I thought their weeks of talk and preparation were just to beat our previous time schedule."

"Yes, I reckoned it would go at that; still, Mr. Crocker's word's the law."

"But why did n't he give you more warning? You have n't even a day to get ready!"

"Our folks have biggeh pots a-boiling than staging. Howeveh, the Boss is in Virginia now; and I reckon he got so tired of those blamed Placerville Stage agents blowin' oveh there, that he's relyin' on us to shut their mouths. And we've got to do it, if we ain't ready. It's my trip."

"It will be done if Uncle Billy drives," Stella replied fondly.

"And when John Spalding furnishes the stock and wagon," he added loyally.

"The race is on!" Alvin shouted, as he pegged in with a message for Sally B.

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Exclamations in concert were shot at Alvin from several tables.

"Yes, the steamer 'Chrysopolis' left the San Francisco wharf at four o'clock; and she's streaking it up the Bay like lightning!"

"I hope she'll keep up her gait plumb to Sacramento," Uncle Billy said at the first break in the hubbub.

"You bet she won't," some one replied. "She'll have a breakdown after she gets the mail and passengers off at Freeport for the Placerville Stage people."

"Don't you go into partnership with any worry," Alvin said, pausing at the door. "I ain't giving away the clicker; but let me tell you the C. P.'s ain't fools."

"That boy's no fool, eitheh," Uncle Billy said aside to Stella, as the door slammed. "It's a pity the good Lord started him with such a handicap."

"If any one has to bear that cross Alvin's the one," Stella returned earnestly. "He has the will, the cheerful spirit to rise above it. And he will! Mark my words, Uncle Billy! He'll make a man we'll all be proud of."

A dull red crept over Viola's neck and cheek. She did not lift her head, but Stella caught the grateful gleam under her trembling lids.

Uncle Billy wondered at Stella's vehemence. He knew nothing of the afternoon drama that was tragedy to the young people, if only a passing scene to the bustling woman who rose as Uncle Billy pushed back his chair.

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"I got to have hot lunch ready for them passengers to eat on the fly," Sally B. said brusquely. "Uncle Billy, what time do you reckon they 'll be here?"

"Some time neah about fo' o'clock in the mawnin', I figger. You can tell into five minutes when we heah what time the train leaves Sacramento."

Sally B. sped away to the kitchen. Stella detained Uncle Billy a second in the hall, her hand on his coat lapel. She had intended to speak with him about schools, where to go, how to set about the new life; but these questions must wait. His trip and its success were the only things that mattered now.

"Are n't you going to rest?" she asked. "There are plenty others to work. Go to bed early, won't you, Uncle Billy?"

He closed his warm, strong hand over hers with fond pressure. It was sweet to have her womanly solicitude, to feel her near him, her soft hand pulsing under his own. "Afteh the fight is time enough to rest, little girl. I must see that my wagon and stock are all right for the first hard drive. I'll have to trust to luck afteh that, or to the hostilehs,—that's about the same thing."

"Well, rest as much as you can, then. I'll have a luck flower for your button-hole when you start." She smiled into his eyes, her own shining with excitement. "You will win, Uncle Billy! I know it!"

She watched him down the street to the stage barn, where she knew no item of preparation would escape his vigilant eye. Yet there was time to spare. Would he take advantage of it? Perhaps not. She

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knew he was master of that perfect relaxation that prepares for stress as well as sleep does.

Alvin had dropped his study, Viola was fighting her trouble alone, and Sally B. was in the kitchen. Stella, left with no pressing duty, wandered into the dark parlor. Lighting it was Viola's task, but she had forgotten to-night, to Stella's satisfaction.

She drew a chair to the window that faced the dim mountain across the gorge, closed her senses to the little world about her, and was quickly off with the sprites of the night to keep her heart's tryst with Alfred. Not quite alone did they two meet this night in Fancy's fair halls. Viola, Alvin, even Sally B.'s uncompromising black eyes interrupted Stella's dreams.

Minutes ticked by unheeded. Hurrying feet came and went; calls, cries, hasty commands, odors of unusual cooking floated past inadequate doors; but Stella was oblivious till a draught of air struck her cheek sharply, and Gideon's voice called her.

She started to her feet. "Gideon! Where—you said 'To-morrow' in your message! Who told you I was here?"

"No one. I can always find you, Stella. Something tells me. The instant I opened the door I knew you were here. A kind of fragrance—I could tell it—"

"Don't, Gideon," she interrupted. She was looking for matches, but his alert sense caught the aversion in tone and movement.

"Your father once told me that a Pima princess was my great-grandmother. I cannot escape my heri-

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tage from her." He took the match she had struck and lighted the hanging lamp. The flame shone full on his upturned face; and Stella gazed at him fascinated, while he adjusted wick and shade. What a splendid being he was! Success had given him assurance, poise. With quick discrimination he had seen and adopted the best graces of speech and custom that he had observed in other men; in doing so had given them the potency of his own individuality. Every time he came he seemed to Stella a new being, or many beings. He was the savage, the gentleman; the sinner, the saint. And the magnetic, compelling, sinuously graceful body that housed them all was also chameleon-like.

To-night he was darkly handsome, brilliant, alluring, as some gorgeous swamp flower whose false fragrance vanquishes. Stella, gazing at him backgrounded by the white curtain, saw a ruby-tinted light gleam evanescently over his face like an impalpable mask. His black, waving hair had an individual life of its own, as did his hands, his features. He seemed to her excited gaze the concentrated beat and pulse of a hundred lives controlled by the master will that spoke through his burning eyes. Often she wondered about his power over her, wondered why Gideon away, was so small a part of her life; yet near, so masterful, monopolizing. In the pause while he attended to the lamp this question rose again; and was still unanswered.

He turned to meet her mute scrutiny. His eyes were deep and tender, his voice wooing. "You're glad to see me, are n't you, sweet Star?" He threw his arm

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about her waist with a motion both swift and gentle, as might be a panther mother's, and kissed her on the forehead.

"Don't, Gideon!" Stella cried, breathless, struggling unavailingly, yet not quite sorry that his arm did not yield. Always with Gideon present came the memory of their comradeship, a comforting sense of his strength, a desire to lean upon him. If he would only be content with brotherliness!

"Moppett, why do you push me away? It's so long since I saw you. If I were your brother by blood as I am by rearing, you'd take my kiss, and kiss me back. Is n't the tie almost as close? We've been so much more to each other than ordinary brother and sister." He dropped his arm and stepped back; and the consideration, the gentleness and regret in his tone, subdued Stella with quick contrition.

"Oh, Gideon, I don't mean to be cold, unkind; but I'm afraid of — of what I see in your eyes."

He looked long into her face. "Dear little girl!" he said at length; and the adjective did not seem unfitting when he stood near her. "Don't be afraid of me, Stella. I love you, and I want your love in return, not your fear."

"But I can't help it, Gideon. You would compel me, hurt me. Does true love ever hurt?"

"Does a mother love her child when she gives it into the surgeon's hands?"

Stella would not see his meaning. "That does n't apply to us."

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"It does, Stella." He went to her again, standing close, and looking down upon her tenderly. "I've come for you, dear." He kissed her suddenly. "I remember what you said, flower-eyes. I'll not kiss you on the lips till — till I've the right —"

"Gideon, you can never have that!" she interrupted, springing back.

Still he controlled himself to gentleness. "Stella, dear, listen. Love like mine compels love. You think your heart forever lost to that — to the man who has deserted you. Yet you surely will soon wake to the shame of it. Your womanhood will help me, if not your love; that will follow. I've a house and garden for you in Sacramento; your own home, trim and neat, where the roses on the trellis wait for your care. There you shall live in peace, and show the gossips that Alfred Vincent did not break your heart — did not win you to cast you off. To-morrow we shall be married —"

Stella had hardly listened at first. She was wondering how to gain her old footing with him; and his tender forbearance had dulled her apprehensiveness. She longed to keep him in her life, longed to understand him and his suddenly acquired wisdom. But in a flash she waked to the full import of his words. "Marriage!" "To-morrow!" She could never laugh this down as a mere boyish dream! She tore herself free, escaped his eye. Her tied tongue broke its fetters at last, and she cut short his impetuous speech.

"Gideon! Gideon! Stop, for Heaven's sake! How many times must I tell you I cannot—I will not

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marry you? I love Alfred Vincent. Some day he intends to marry me—”

“Intends to marry you! Some day!” Tenderness fled. The words flashed forth like the hiss of a snake. He faced her fiercely, the veins in his forehead swelling quickly, undulatingly. The primordial male was master now, holding in leash every grace of refinement, every saint’s virtue he had won. “Listen, Stella Anthony! If that woman-dandy cared for you, if he had been man enough to marry you, to put you beyond the insult of railroad-camp gossip and curiosity, I’d hide away in the mountains and live on memories. But he’s spoiling your life! And he shall not live to spoil it longer! I’ll—”

“No, no, Gideon!” she broke in excitedly. “Don’t say those words! You shall not harm him!” She stood erect, her eye blazing back flame for flame. For herself weak, for him she loved she was a lioness at bay. “Do you call that love?” she asked scornfully, “to strike a woman through the man she loves? I could hate you, Gideon Ingram! Leave me! I hope never to see your face again!”

Gideon did not speak. Stella roused and angry was a new being to him. He had not realized that her spirit was as intrepid as his own. Stripped of compassion for his love for her, wrenched free from the claim of their past, she flung out her stinging words like whip-strokes.

“Love! What do you know of that sacred thing? Hide in your mountains? Yes! And stay, till you learn that first of all love is not for self, but to serve

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the loved one. I could never love you. If Alfred were ten times dead, I'd not marry you!"

Red lights were burning in Gideon's passionate eyes, and he turned to her with savage counter threat. Still, selfishness was not all of his love. He believed Alfred really a villain. No conception of his complex motives, his superfine sense of honor, was possible to Gideon. This reticent Easterner out of the way, Stella would surely turn to him. She had little idea of the depth of his devotion. To love, to bless her with his service, his life, was all he asked. Nothing she had done or could do would change him. Indeed, he was no ordinary man to rate his love by the flip-pant measure of other men's eyes. Stella maligned, friendless, sinning, if that could be, was Stella only the more in need of him, the dearer. But her last words, her fearless attitude, were a revelation; and underneath all the fury of the moment something in him leaped with fresh ardor to meet this magnificent girl, peerless, beautifully imperious, more than ever his mate.

"Whether Vincent lives or not, you shall be my wife, Stella Anthony! There's no other woman in the world but you, and I shall be worthy of you. You *shall* see my face again,—you shall pray to see it!" He towered over her, his stormy eyes fixed on hers unflinchingly, yet he did not touch her. "Good-bye," he said in a lower voice. "I shall find him; and I shall come again!" He stepped backward as he finished.

She sprang after him, but he had closed the door and slid into the night. When she looked out he

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was neither to be seen nor heard. She stood a moment in the open doorway, striving to quiet the tumult of soul and body. The weakness of reaction came quickly. The scene rehearsed grew in portent. No fiery courage rose to meet the memory of his threats; yet they grew more dreadful; and the compelling power of his presence remained. A dozen uncertain plans chased one another through her whirling brain. She would telegraph Alfred. But where? What could she say? She could not send heart tragedies over the wires, accuse Gideon beforehand of murder!

She would write—get Uncle Billy to deliver her letter in person. Yet where? Alfred might not go to Virginia on the racing stage, might have already gone! Uncle Billy might not win—yes, he must win! And Gideon—would he not take passage on Uncle Billy's stage, arrive, wait for Alfred? Before Uncle Billy could slip from duty and deliver his message, Gideon would already have found his victim! Oh, Gideon had the craft of the lynx! How could Alfred escape him?

She wrote a feverish letter, destroyed it, and wrote again; then hastened out to find Uncle Billy. In the kitchen she came upon Sally B. superintending the extra baking.

"Uncle Billy? He's snatchin' forty winks. He did n't go up till a bit ago; he ain't to be disturbed." She was emphatic. "Say! The race begins O.K.! Train'll be here at two-fifty instid o' four o'clock! Uncle Billy 'lows he'll git off in four minutes after."

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"Oh, I must speak to him alone," Stella pleaded; "just a minute, when he comes down. Tell him when you call him, won't you?"

Another time Sally B. would have heeded the distress in Stella's tone, and questioned her; but she was intent on her work, caught in the hour's excitement. She gave absent-minded assent; and Stella crept back to the parlor, where she lowered the lamp and again sat down with her fears. Had Gideon been able to get a seat in Uncle Biily's coach? She would go and see. She opened the door and peered out. The street was deserted. Yet bright, unshaded windows gleaming in all directions; extra lights in the saloon across the way; knots of men at the doors; the rattle of chips, the clink of ice and glass, and an occasional voice raised above the subdued murmur that came from Sally B.'s bar-room,—all told Stella that the town waited awake for the night's event.

She stole out, passed the hotel, and peeped guiltily into the stage office. Only the clerk on duty was within, and he was nodding. Cautiously she approached and looked over the passenger list that lay open on the counter. Gideon had not booked.

She speculated an instant concerning his movements; but a confusion of loud, angry voices across the way told her of a midnight brawl, sent her flying back to the hotel parlor. From the shelter of the dark room she saw a man come out of the saloon and run down the street; saw two dim forms hurry away from the rear and disappear into the protecting timber; a little later saw the doctor and the officer running toward

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the saloon. Sick with a knowledge she fain would have ignored, she seated herself to wait for Uncle Billy.

One o'clock!

Though half stunned by dread and fear, she yet could not face Sally B. again, and the busy kitchen. She paced restlessly, stopped to re-read her letter and add a penciled word, and went into the hall to listen for Uncle Billy. Silence. No one was stirring in the house outside of the cook's domain.

Back she turned to her nervous tread, counting her steps mechanically. Her mind was painfully alert, supersensitive. She felt the wing of evil spirits abroad; knew that the bare walls Alvin was so soon to leave housed many a grinning shape in their dark corners,—shapes whispering, jeering, holding aloft to him crutches that were alive, that writhed and twisted with python power. She thought of the old grandmother, who even now pondered upon death, and was prepared for it; and of little Viola by her side, scarcely launched upon womanhood, her heart, all untrained to sorrow, foretasting widowhood. And the Furies, not content with blood they had drawn across the way, were they not hounding Gideon through the night upon a cruel errand?

The half-hour struck.

"The clock is surely wrong!" Stella whispered. But the dining-room clock quickly rang a confirming chime; and the doomful tick, tick, went slowly on.

She crept out again to the stage office, where the clerk no longer coquetted with duty in his chair, but lay full length on the counter, frankly seduced by

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Morpheus. The passenger list still lay open, and Stella looked. Gideon's name was not there!

She wondered why, since his looks even more than his words told her that he would seek Alfred at once. As she walked back new fears beset her. Why was Gideon not going on the stage? Could Alfred be already on his way to Colfax? Near? Coming now, and Gideon had learned it? A terrifying vision of their meeting shook her; yet quick comfort came with the recollection of Alfred's promised telegram. He would surely keep his word.

Ten minutes of two! Ten minutes past—fifteen!

A light step came down the stair, and Stella flew into the hall.

"Uncle Billy!" she called softly, and drew him into the parlor. She put her letter in his hand, told him of Gideon, breathlessly describing Alfred's danger, though concealing its cause. She did not dream that Uncle Billy guessed it well.

He promised to mount guard over Alfred, though he scoffed at her fear, and declared that Gideon, son of the night, was doubtless alone somewhere fighting out his anger.

"Oh, Uncle Billy, you're such a dear, good father to me," she cried impetuously; and, heedless, did not see the light die in his eyes, recked not of a missed heart-beat.

His back was toward the lamp, his face downcast; yet when he lifted it again, he was calm, his voice steady, though Stella caught a vibrant sadness in it she could not understand.

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"Honey, there's something I've been wishing to speak to you about for a month o' Sundays, but I could n't raise the pluck." He stopped; and Stella, so overwrought, grew suddenly apprehensive, though she did not speak.

"Yo' Uncle Billy's stake in Mammon's mighty small; but such as it is, it is deeded to you, child. I haven't any kin of my own, that is, none that's as neah to me as you are, honey. I fixed the papehs in Auburn yestehday."

For an instant Stella did not comprehend. She looked questioningly into his face, and he smiled back at her, waiting for her to speak. Then it broke suddenly,—a will! All a young heart's dread of death came into her eyes. Uncle Billy dead! And she profiting by it? It could not be. He surely would live long years still. She could not spare him!

The precipient sorrow, the generous deed, broke down Stella's defences, and tears flowed uncontrolled while she haltingly told her gratitude. Uncle Billy had barely dried her eyes when Sally B.'s step sounded in the hall.

"I'm in heah, Sally B.," he called, "and all ready." Before she could turn back from the stairs and enter, he drew Stella to him and kissed her. "Don't forget my luck posy, honey," he whispered, as Sally B. opened the door. And in that instant Stella's eyes were opened.

Ten minutes later the coaches, Uncle Billy's leading, lined up beside the thronged sidewalk. Some

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passengers stood near the second coach. Only a privileged few coming on the train would go with Uncle Billy.

Stella, a rose in her hand, stood with others near the stage office door. "Is Mr. Ingram going with Uncle Billy, or in the other coach?" she asked the clerk, as he returned to his post from some errand.

"Ingram? He left town hours ago. Took Ball's best horse, Nig. Told Ball if he broke the nag's wind he'd pay any figure Ball—"

Stella did not wait to hear him through. "Book me for Virginia City!" she cried. "In Uncle Billy's coach—"

"You can't—" he began.

A whistle shrilled through the darkness.

"Yes! yes! I'll make him let me!" she panted, and was gone.

A deep rumble shook the town. The "Governor Stanford" raced into the station. Flying figures caught up mail and treasure and ran with them to the waiting coach. Passengers, their linen dusters floating back on the night breeze, hurried after, gulping Sally B.'s scalding coffee on the run, and snatching her neatly packed hot lunches.

Stella, fastening her cloak, and carrying a small valise in the other hand, came flying out of the hotel door. She pressed her scant golden horde into the booking clerk's hand as she passed. "Give the change to Mrs. Sally," she said through set teeth, and ran around in the street to the opposite side of the stage. "Please help me up, sir," she called softly to the

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passenger on the box. "I've booked, and I'm to have the seat next you."

The man moved, intending to step down and help her up; but the hostlers cried "All ready!"

"No, no! There is n't time," Stella called frantically, as she heard Uncle Billy answer the hostlers. "Reach me your hand!" she implored, her foot on the forward hub.

The passenger obeyed, and she was seated, the "luck rose" safe between her teeth, when Uncle Billy sprang up, crying "Let 'em go!" His face was full of disappointment in spite of the jovial replies he flung back to the torrent of good wishes from the bystanders. As he swiftly gathered the lines he caught sight of Stella.

"Good Lord! You cain't go, honey!"

"I must! You'll —"

The hostlers loosed their hold with a yell, and the horses sprang out. With wild cheers behind them they plunged into the black night. The race was again on.

CHAPTER XX II

THE RACE

EASTWARD through thick darkness they flew. Stella, untimid, knowing horses as the smart girl of to-day knows her pedigreed dog, yet marvelled at Uncle Billy's timely discernment of every rut and hole; at the skill that slowed or gave rein to the galloping team with such nice calculation. What occult message was it that sped down the lines from Uncle Billy's mind and hand, that made man and bounding beast one intelligence?

The sharp rushing air made Stella shiver. Uncle Billy felt it through the same sense that guided him over the unseen road. Shifting the lines to his right hand, with the other he pulled a buffalo robe from under the seat, and adjusted it about her with quick skill.

"Thank you," she said gratefully, and was silent on account of the stranger at her left. Yet a little later, under cover of the dark, the rose went into Uncle Billy's button-hole, and in answer to his low question Stella repeated the booking clerk's news of Gideon.

The cloudy sky; the road overhung by trees and more felt than seen; the silence; the still, dead hour before dawn—these soon tied tongues that had wagged volubly enough in the train. And the steady beat and roar of team and coach seemed to Stella a

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wave of doom crashing through the dark, still mountains.

An inhospitable gray crept at last into the sky, and showed the road dully red. The lash went singing through the air in long, unwinding coils. Though no horse was struck, the six leaped to added speed.

"Come on, boys! It's the day of yo' life!" Uncle Billy called cheerily. "You, Socks an' Boots, set 'em a pace there!"

It was a trumpet call to the leaders. Indeed, all the horses caught the race spirit, and stretched to their task with almost human ardor.

"Misteh Montague, will you time us from that pine tree yondeh?" the driver asked of the passenger on the other side of Stella.

"Three forty-four," he said when a mile had sped behind.

"It would have been three twenty-four if old Snorteh and Posey had been leading. But I reckon we'll make this beat in pretty good shape with Socks and Boots."

"That's great speed. You can't make it much of the time, can you?"

"No, sah; not as much of the time as I'd like to." Uncle Billy barely touched the "nigh swing" horse with the lash, and the double tree pulled true again. "This is the best team I'll have; and two houhs lateh there'll be a heap of wagons on the grade. No otheh chance fo' speed this side of Donneh Lake. Hey, there, Socks an' Boots! Stretch yo'selves!"

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"What queer names," ventured Stella, her eyes on the straining leaders.

"Yes. It fits, though. See? That nigh leadeh's white clean up to his sorrel knees; the otheh's sorrel plumb down to his white fetlocks."

Foam-flecked, panting, dripping, the wheel horses dun with dust, they swung into the first changing station. Instantly, with grind of wheel against the brake-block, motion died from the spent team. Their heads drooped. Heaving flanks and gleaming, fire-red nostrils kept time to each pounding heart. Their stertorous breathing was pitiful; and Stella's heart ached for them as they limped off behind the hostlers.

Uncle Billy was on the ground before the wheels had stopped, and forward among the horses. He gave the one nearest him an affectionate slap and a low word. Stella saw the jaded creature turn to the caress, and knew then why John Spalding said that Billy Dodge could get more out of his stock with less damage than any other driver the Company had.

The change was made with incredible swiftness. A fresh team stood harnessed and ready. A man to each horse, they led them in line and hooked them up close upon the heels of the retiring team. Other men looked to the running gear, tested the wheels, saw that the lumbering coach was everywhere safe to continue its lurching, racking journey.

Stella now saw Uncle Billy on duty, silent, watchful, himself observed by all, the captain and autocrat of this horseflesh battle against mountains and time. A

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proprietary pride warmed Stella's heart as she noticed the eager deference paid him; his nonchalance; his apparent unconcern as he rubbed his hands limber while pacing slowly, or leaned in perfect repose against the rough porch pillar of the station house.

The bartender brought him a hot drink. He sipped a little and returned the glass unemptied. A woman came to the door with warm crullers; but he shook his head with a smile and a word that made refusal as gracious as acceptance.

A passenger attempted to alight.

"Don't leave yo' seat, sah! There won't be time," the driver commanded. The man drew back without protest.

Stella wondered where lay the power in the soft, slow speech that compelled from man and beast not only instant but willing obedience.

"How is it the 'Chrysopolis' did n't break down between Freeport and Sacramento?" asked a bystander, eager for news of the race. "I expected they'd play that trick on us."

Uncle Billy's lip curled. "The snipes! They had it fixed to slow up and take two houhs fo' the twelve miles to Sacramento; but we beat 'em! Had a mes-sengeh there on a race horse. He took the Virginia mail and papehs into Sacramento like greased lightning; and our train pulled out only forty-nine minutes afteh their cyars left Freeport."

Scant were the moments, hardly reaching a plural, before they were off again.

"We'll pass Gideon suah; he's got powehful little

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the start of us," Uncle Billy whispered to Stella as he took his seat. "He cain't get a fresh horse this side of Coburn's."

Stella started at Gideon's name. Yet her fears were less insistent, overridden by the excitement of the race. Was Gideon on the wing? No matter. They, too, were hurrying, flying! Before Gideon could harm Alfred, she would reach him, save him!

They were now on the long, long climb, though it dipped downward in a few short spaces. But up grade or down, over culvert or bridge, under arching tree or ringing along the bare lip-like track blasted from the grudging mountain, without pause or slack the beating hoofs raced on. The sun rose in belated glory long after it had gilded far western summits. It soon clouded; yet the brief glimpse cheered the travellers and loosed their tongues; and isolated exclamations expanded to conversation and stories.

On the box the two men exchanged anecdotes.

"Oh, yes," Uncle Billy responded to a question from the other, "the California Stage Company's an old concern. Why, they operated fo' hundred and fifty miles as fah back as '53. They kept adding territory till they had eleven hundred and mo' miles, and upwards of twelve hundred head of stock."

"They've sold most of their lines, have n't they?" the young man asked.

"Yes. The po' stage driveh's getting steamed off the earth. I don't know what'll become of him."

"Oh, he'll get a job with the iron horse."

"We would n't win in that business. What would

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"I do with a train?" Uncle Billy asked earnestly. "I don't know how to hook heh up, nothin' about the running geah, nor heh disposition. If she kicked I would n't know whetheh it was fo' cause, or fo' dev-iltry."

"Perhaps not as an engineer; but as a conductor you 'd be a shining success."

Stella endorsed that opinion enthusiastically.

"Did the California Stage Company start the Overland Express, Mr. Dodge?"

"The western end, yes; and Louis McLane's operating it yet to Salt Lake. From there on it's the Old Man's goose. Been running daily eveh since '59."

"Daily or otherwise," laughed the other.

"When it's othehwise, it's the Old Man's end," the driver said with emphasis.

"Keep yo' feet, you son of Poseidon!" he called suddenly as one of the "swing team" went down on his knees.

"Oh, oh! He's bleeding, Uncle Billy! His knees —his mouth—"

"Don't look, honey!" he said sympathetically. "It cain't be helped. We've got to win if it kills the stock." Yet he favored the poor stumbler when possible till they came to the changing station.

"What in —" Uncle Billy began angrily as soon as his feet touched the ground; but stopped, and sent a quick look toward Stella. "Is that all the team you 've got for me? That stock's plumb done up."

"I know it, Mr. Dodge," a hostler replied. "Charley's team went over the grade last night,—two killed

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soon as they struck; and we had to give him your outfit. This is Livermore's stock, just in. Will you wait for water?"

"Cain't do it. Hook 'em up, po' devils! And don't take eternity fo' it, eitheh!" the driver answered grimly, and spent the short moment examining each poor animal that would that day be martyred to the race.

"Yo' posy's brought one piece of luck, Stella," he said as he mounted again. "It's raining oveh there on them Placerville fellehs."

Stella looked south to the black clouds overhanging high summits, and hoped that Uncle Billy himself could out-drive the storm that was roaring northward. They flashed by a toll gate, the driver sending a flying greeting to the gate keeper.

Stella drew a breath of relief for the horses as they looked into fair Summit Valley, a green gem set in the midst of barren rock and perpetual snow, its smooth level the only reminder of the lake it had supplanted.

Fresh horses at Tinker's, and on again!

Uncle Billy's call rang out shrilly, and a long line of freight wagons, one after another, turned out for the "Overland." Like a flash the coach whipped by. Wagons, "back-actions," and "double back-actions," four, six, ten, twenty mule teams, each managed with a single line by the rider on the wheel horse.

"How wonderful!" Stella exclaimed. "Two chains of harnessed horses galloping daily across this vast wilderness, the link between wanderers and home. And this slower chain—"

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"Grub chain," Mr. Montague added as she paused.

"Ever seen Mr. Holladay's palace travelling coach?" Mr. Montague asked Uncle Billy a little later.

"No, sah; but I've heard of it. What does it look like?"

"It's luxury on wheels; bullet-proof, with kitchen, dining-room, and bedroom; all furnished gilt edged, and sporting a *chef*."

A long whistle was the only answer, for they had rounded a point and were looking out upon Donner Lake, three thousand feet below.

To-day no luxurious passenger speeding fast asleep through forty miles of snow-sheds may know the magnificence of that vision, the splendor of that morning flight down the zigzagging steep. A mile and a half as the crow flies, and but three miles over the crooked wagon road, to the beautiful blue lake that mirrors alike heaven and tragedy. The way was too steep and tortuous for speed; yet the horses kept their steady gallop, the coach pressing hard upon them; and now and again the wheels on one side or the other whirled high in air as they swung around some sharp point or into a claspng gorge.

The roar and rattle of the stage could be heard from crest to lake. Forewarned by every section man, the heavy teams were on the turnouts waiting. And as the mail coach rushed by, each lonely teamster took up the cheer wafted from his fellows behind, and sent it gayly on to the next.

Uncle Billy spoke no more. His arms were straight, his strong, pliant fingers guiding, steadying, now

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checking, now urging the speeding coursers. He was holding on his slightest motion the fate of his passengers, Stella's dear life! His foot moved on the brake only to press it the harder against the screeching wheels.

"Hold on to Miss Anthony, Montague," he commanded suddenly.

Stella looked—turned cold and faint. Ahead of them were two men in a light buggy. Heedless of warning they had tried to make one more turnout. Now they were caught on the narrow grade.

It was impossible to stop. To go on meant—

There was no time for nice reasoning. Uncle Billy's the right of way; theirs the transgression; they must pay!

He swung his team cruelly close to the perpendicular inner wall, his hubs and whiffletrees grinding the rock alarmingly. But of no avail. The frail vehicle was caught, tossed like an egg-shell, and men and beasts went crashing down into the dark abyss.

Stella covered her eyes, and never knew how near she came to death; never knew that, while Uncle Billy's skill by a miracle kept the stage upright, it was Mr. Montague's arm that saved her from falling. Yet on they swept without pause for cheer or catastrophe. Past tremendous reaches of dark forest. Over long stretches of rock yet unclothed by Nature. Rattling across torrent-cut gorges, over earth "fills," through narrow cuts. Ever down, down! At last one more plunge, and out upon the haunted shore of the cerulean lake, the smooth, secret lake, that carries within its soundless bosom remembered horrors that named it.

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Along its level shores the road stretched in straight or winding spaces, a fine track for racing. The horses leaped forward to a dead run, that never slackened till, at Coburn's, beside the swift, tortuous Truckee, the relief team met them.

On again. Out from fir forests and rocky barriers, and into the desert boundaries.

Chamberlain's, and breakfast!

How glad they were to stretch themselves on earth once more! Yet no time for dallying.

"Made the last three miles in nine minutes!" Mr. Montague announced as he walked into the dining-room.

But no one replied. Hurrying waiters, steaming dishes, silent, busy passengers,—the scant halt passed like a gust; and again they were flying.

Across the Little Truckee, past Crystal Peak, on, through gray dampness, half mist, half rain, out into the clear, close-bending sun of the desert. Steaming, straining, swaying; horses stiff from motion; passengers stiff from inaction, yet tense, expectant,—on to Reno.

Again upward, past the spouting, Tartarus-smelling Steamboat Springs, over the smooth Geiger Grade, and at last into the gray, straggling city hung against the bare breast of Mount Davidson,—Virginia, golden goal of their flight.

Superintendent Crocker, watch in hand, stood on the hotel steps to welcome them, as Uncle Billy swung in with a grand finishing flourish.

"One o'clock! Twenty-one hours and five minutes

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from San Francisco! Hurrah for you, Billy Dodge!" Mr. Crocker cried; and rousing cheers echoed from the waiting crowd.

"From Colfax our driver has averaged a mile in four and a third minutes," Mr. Montague called, looking up from a quick calculation.

"By George, Montague! That almost beats engine and steamer! Hurrah again, boys!"

"But where 's the Placehville Stage?" Uncle Billy asked as he came stiffly up the steps, Stella by his side.

"This came an hour ago," Mr. Crocker said, putting a despatch in the driver's hand. "Read that," he exclaimed exultingly.

"Strawberry Valley, noon. Heavy rains, heavy roads, heavy loads," Uncle Billy read.

"We're in time, then?" Stella whispered softly.

Uncle Billy nodded. Wilder cheers made speech impossible.

Strawberry Valley was sixty-three miles away!

CHAPTER XXIII

A HEART FOR A LIFE

IN the depressing loneliness of a strange hotel Stella's fears returned, multiplied by the hours they had rested. Impatiently she paced the small room. She had no watch to count the minutes. But that the sun still shone on the mountain above her, she would have declared it already night.

Where was Uncle Billy? Why had n't he come to take her to dinner?

Innocent Stella! She knew nothing of Mrs. Grundy's code; suspected no whit of the reason for Uncle Billy's aloofness. In Colfax, under Sally B.'s powerful wing, where Uncle Billy was known and approved, no one would have dared a breath against her. But it was very different in this feverish city born of the spirit of gambling, where money made to-day was lost to-morrow, and none escaped the whirl of fortune's wheel. Here every sort of excess abounded. Though the commonest viands were fabulously dear, people yet feasted the more. In the day men delved in the darkness below; in the night they rioted in the darkness above. Good women were few. Honest men, toiling for loved ones away, jostled the blackleg, the gambler, the man of many aliases; and petticoated vice preyed upon its authors, and sorely beset clean hearts as well. A beautiful,

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friendless girl must indeed be hedged by angels if she were to run safely the gantlet of this "wickedest city in the world."

Stella went to the window that opened against the mountain side. The roughly cut rock wall rose close, high and seamed. With half her mind she counted the slanting lines that marked the strata; noted their colors, caught the glint of yellow, and wondered idly if it was gold.

Movement high above arrested her eye. She pressed closer to watch a Chinaman hanging out washing. Automatically she began to count the white pieces as they were pinned against the flapping wind: sheets, pillow-slips, table linen daintily hemmed and marked; many textile evidences of civilization, clean and white. Only a clothes-line on the brink of a rock wall; yet Stella knew that the unseen house beyond sheltered a family of neatness and refinement. A baby! There were the little dresses, socks, night slips, fine and lace-trimmed. Oh, it was not only a house, it was a home! And love dwelt there!

Time went faster for the break in her worry. Indistinct echoes of commotion below floated to her the message of the arrival of the other stage. She left her room and wandered about in search of the parlor; came upon it at last,—small, stuffy, and possessed by several over-dressed, be-diamonded women, who stared at her brazenly and openly commented on her.

As from a pestilence, she fled to her own corridor again, hesitating before her door. But vanquished by

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thought of the desolation within, she dropped the key in her pocket, and began walking the narrow hall, darker, emptier than her room, but open at either end to human approach. Here the hall boy found her, bringing a message from Uncle Billy to meet him in the parlor.

Stella thought of it a little resentfully as she hurried on, recalling the inhospitable occupants. But they were gone; and at sight of Uncle Billy's cheery face she forgot they had ever been.

He came to her with outstretched hands. "As I told you, honey, Vincent's O.K. He's—"

"Here?" she interrupted impetuously.

"No; he did n't come through, honey. Blodgett, the driveh, said he got off at Carson. Cadwalladeh met him; they seemed to have business togetheh."

"Oh!" The long-drawn exclamation was all of Stella's reply; and he hoped she would ask no questions.

"You must shut those sweet peepehs of yo's sharp afteh suppeh; get right smart of sleep to-night, fo' you must start home early in the mawning."

"Gideon—where do you suppose he is, Uncle Billy?"

He had dreaded the words. "Honey, why do you pesteh yo'self about Gideon? If Vincent's doing business with anotheh man, both of them C. P. fellows, how can Gideon get in any deviltry?"

Stella was not reassured. "But, Uncle Billy, Phineas Cadwallader's no protection; he hates Alfred. And why did n't we see Gideon on the way? He

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must have come in ahead of us—must be here now, and— If I could only get word from Alfred!”

“Shall I telegraph for you?”

She shrank back. “Oh, no. He would n’t wish me to send him messages over the wires.”

“I’ll fix that. He won’t know yo’re heah.”

“That will be good; thank you. I’m such a trouble to you, Uncle Billy! And my trip has been quite useless,” she added wearily.

“Not useless, honey. You brought me luck—won the race for us.”

She smiled. “I hope I’ll bring you more luck. I’ll go home with you to-morrow.”

“That’s right, child. Good-bye till mawning. Have sweet dreams.”

“Good-bye?” she echoed wonderingly. “Are n’t you going to stay here to-night? Take me in to supper.”

He winced before her steady eyes, and lied heroically. “I have a heap to do befo’ I’ll be ready for the trip home; and I won’t have time to see you again. Eat a good suppeh, child, won’t you? Have you money to pay for it?”

“Not a two-bit piece, Uncle Billy. You pay for me, won’t you? And book me, too? I’ll have it for you when we get home.”

She was surprised by his silence and nervousness. He opened his purse quickly, and forced some money upon her, his embarrassment increasing as he looked furtively through each open door while pressing her hand shut over the coin. “Take that,” he whispered.

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"You must pay yo' own bills, and book yo'self, honey. Don't ask me why!" he added as she opened her lips to speak.

Instantly he was gone, leaving her to puzzle out the matter for herself. But the need for dissembling her relations with Uncle Billy, whom she had known longer than any one living save Gideon, did not dawn upon her.

Supper alone was less an ordeal than she had expected. On her return to her room she met the hall boy, and ordered pen and paper. She had barely seated herself to write, when a despatch interrupted her; it was addressed to William Dodge, and was from Alfred at Carson City. "Am detained here. Will be in Colfax on the thirtieth."

In the reaction of relief she wrote a short, almost happy letter to Alfred, sending it to post by the hall boy. Yet when it was gone a great humiliation overtook her. What had she accomplished by following her wild impulse, by her impetuous rush to the succor of her lover? Worse than nothing! Whatever danger might have threatened him, probably still threatened, would be neither hindered nor lessened by her coming. The largest part of her savings had been spent. Sally B. would have to invent something to silence gossiping tongues; for girls did not then make flying trips, unchaperoned and unquestioned.

Long she pondered there on her sleepless bed in the strange hotel, listening to the booming, pulsing voice of the city, which was alive only at night. Self-control, reticence, a mask for her too tell-tale face, —

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these she must acquire at any cost. And Alfred — she must love by trusting him, by trusting God.

The next day they faced homeward. No other passenger shared the box seat with Stella; and leisurely, a little shyly, she told Uncle Billy of her plans for school, and received his advice, heartfelt if not always wise.

At Dutch Flat she stopped to visit an acquaintance, timing her home-going for Uncle Billy's next trip, hoping vainly that Alfred would be with him. It was indeed a home-coming! Days only she had been away; they seemed weeks. Sally B., Viola, Yic Wah, even the dog, greeted her overpoweringly. Suddenly she realized what a heart-wrench leaving it would be.

"Here's a letter for you," Sally B. said, when Stella was at last free. "It came yesterday."

She took it, but paled with quick fear when she saw the strange handwriting. She hastened to her room. Behind the locked door she stared at the envelope, wondering what was within, dreading to open it, fearing. Did it herald tragedy? Alfred — was he? — was it of him? She did not take off hat or gloves, yet was half-conscious of their closeness, their hindrance as she turned the letter in her shaking hands. At last she tore it open. There was neither date, address, nor signature; but the message was cruel.

"STELLA ANTHONY: Alfred Vincent's life is in your hands. Send to the address below within one week after October thirtieth, your written word that you will marry Gideon Ingram, and Vincent shall go free. Refuse to do this, and he shall die. Return this letter with your answer, or it will not avail."

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In the postscript were directions for address; but Stella did not read them. She thrust the sinister sheet out of sight in her pocket; yet the words burned in her brain, written there forever. Motionless, she gazed at the wall in a useless endeavor to think. The pattern of the paper wavered fantastically. The figures grew alive, and enacted hideous tragedies. A chill crept from crown to foot, freezing her to rigidity. She pressed clasped hands to her breast, her half-suspended breath scarcely moving them. She tried to formulate some plan of action, but could hold no idea long. There seemed nothing she could do. Marry Gid—oh, never, never! Yet Alfred would surely be—perhaps already—she could not form the word; but saw herself widowed ere she was wed.

Darkness fell. Still she stood there, leaning against the wall now, though she had no memory of moving. A step caught her ear. She started up, intent on defending herself against interruption. The Chinese boy's harsh voice came through the door, telling her that Alvin waited in the parlor to say good-bye.

"Tell him I can't come!" she called, but the boy had shuffled out of hearing; and in her pause for listening courtesy awoke. She must not hurt Alvin this last night. To leave, without hope, the place where Viola dwelt would be sadness enough.

She went into the parlor. Alvin, a man in years, yet ever the buoyant boy, sprang forward with outstretched hands to greet her.

"Oh, Miss Stella, the fifty miles are done! Done 'pon honor, too! The Commissioners have examined

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and accepted the work. They say it's O.K. and the Government's bound to receive it. And the blamed strike that broke out yesterday won't hinder the C. P. a mite; they've got more men coming on the sly. I'm going to my Sacramento office in the morning. I came to say good— Why, Miss Stella! What's the matter?"

His exuberance was a tonic. Stella's numb heart began to beat a little color to her lips, hope to her soul. Yet she did not speak, though she smiled.

"What is it, Miss Stella?" Alvin repeated. "You look as if you'd died and come back, though not all of you. There's awful things in—your face!"

"And in my heart, too, Alvin. Oh, Alvin, I—" She grew cold again, and was silent.

Tactful Alvin said nothing, but pushing a chair behind her, pressed her gently into it. He did not release her hand, but stroked it softly, waiting for her to speak.

Suddenly she started up. This was the thirtieth, and—a week, the letter had said! And she did not know how far the answer was to go. Precious time had already been wasted. It was ages since she read those awful words. She must do something, tell some one, get help. Alvin! He was the one. She put the letter in his hand. "Read it, quick!" she commanded.

He complied, starting at the first words, then reading on quietly, through the postscript directions, and ending with a careful scrutiny of the envelope. Stella watched him anxiously, wondering, even in her pre-

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occupation, at the maturity and wisdom that came into his face at emergency's call. "Oh, Alvin, there must be some way beside—beside obeying. How can I do that? Yet how can I be Alfred's—mur—murderer?" She shuddered at the word.

Alvin did not reply at once. He gazed at her speculatively a minute before turning to the letter again, in search of some escape from its horrid menace. "Perhaps this is only a threat from some enemy of Gideon's to get him into trouble."

"Oh, no," Stella answered, remembering the last look she had seen in Gideon's face. "I'm sure it—I'm sure Gideon knows of it."

"Oh, pshaw, Miss Stella! Gid Ingram would n't do such a scurvy trick."

"Alvin, you don't know. He has tried to make me marry him. He's crazy with jealousy. I know this letter is his work, that he means it!"

Alvin reflected again. Suddenly his face was illumined. "There's a way, and it's sure—marry me!"

"What? Alvin!" She half rose, angry that he could jest at such a moment. But, no, his face was serious. Yet it was too absurd, impossible!

"Not really, of course, but so far as any one else knows. Elope with me to-night!"

Her eyes were big with astonishment. Gradually his meaning dawned upon her, and the power to think. His daring idea was suggestive of another. "No, Alvin, not even to save Alfred Vincent could I do that. Suicide is cowardly, yet I'd rather kill myself than seem to be so fickle, to betray dear little Viola."

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"Miss Stella, don't speak of suicide! And Viola 'd know how it was, of course. But there's other ways, if you won't accept my offer." He smiled boyishly in spite of the tragic moment.

"Yes, there's another way; I shall disappear, just drop out of sight. And you'll help me, won't you? This very night?"

"Yes, indeed. This night is the only time I could do it, too. I'm to work nights after this."

A distant hooting and yelling broke upon the night.

"That's the strikers. They think they'll stump the Company, but Blowhard Cad's going to slip in on the sly to-night with a couple of carloads of men. The strikers'll come out of the little end of the horn, certain. Folks'll learn pretty soon they can't beat the Central Pacific!" Alvin could not forget the railroad even in the presence of imminent tragedy.

But the noise finally trailed off into silence, and he went on with Stella's problem, scrutinizing the letter again as he spoke. "There's no postmark; the stamp is n't cancelled; and the writer tells you to direct to Dutch Flat. That means that the messenger is spying round here somewhere."

"Can you get me away secretly, Alvin? Have you any plan?"

"Yes, I can fix it. I know a man — he's a friend of mine, and as close-mouthed as a dumb one. I'll get his team and start you on your way to Sacramento, or to the Bay, as you think best. I'd say San Francisco; it's bigger, you can hide safer there."

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"Yes, that will be better. But you, Alvin —"

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'll be back here before daylight, and take the train to-morrow. Every one knows I'm to go to Sacramento."

Stella was silent.

"Got any money?"

"Not much. My trip to Virginia took most of it."

"Well, don't fidget over that. I've a couple of hundred I can lend you as well as not; and you can take your time to pay. No matter if it's never. And maybe Sally B. can think up a better trick for you."

"O, Alvin, you're so good! Thank —" She could not trust her voice, yet after a struggle went on. "I'm sure, Alvin, we've thought of the only way. But we will tell — What time must we start?"

"Not later than midnight. You better get everything fixed before ten, and let the house get plumb dark an hour or so before."

"Very well. I'll have my letter written in a half-hour. Will you come for it, and mail it at once?"

He nodded.

"And Alvin, will you stay here while I talk it all over with Sally B.? I want no misunderstanding of what we are to do."

Alvin assented, and she left him. There was no hesitation now. A strange calmness pervaded her. Without hesitancy or revising she wrote the words that were to separate her from her past, that were to bind her to a life of lonely hiding.

"Not to save any man's life, or even my own," she

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wrote, "will I marry Gideon Ingram. This much I promise, however. I will leave this place and all who know me. I will hide so securely that it will be useless for any to seek me. And I will never meet Alfred Vincent, communicate with him, or receive communication from him, until Gideon Ingram himself gives permission."

She signed the letter, directed and sealed the envelope, and went downstairs.

"You pore little critter!" Sally B. cried, flying to her with open arms as she entered. "Al's told me the hull blamed layout! Blast that durned Injun!" She felt Stella tremble in her arms. "Don't be afeard, honey! You've got friends. Me'n Bill 'll stand by ye. You've struck the only thing to do, I reckon."

Stella stood erect and was silent. The others watched her without speaking, waiting on her mood. At last she faced them.

"This step changes all my life. Please tell Uncle Billy the—the best thing you can think of, Mrs. Sally," Stella said, the words coming slowly, as if she were thinking out her plan as she went. "From this time I shall be Esther Anthony. Only you, Mrs. Sally, shall know where I am, or what I'm doing. Uncle Billy and Alvin—you're so good, Alvin—they can know of me through you. Will you keep my secret, Sally Bernard, sacredly?"

"It's thunderin' noble, this thing that yo're goin' to do, Stella; an' I'll promise, an' keep my mouth shet O.K. if you likewise promise to always let me know where yo're a-hanging out. Do you?"

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"Yes," Stella said, and walked to the window, speechless. No sound escaped her, but Sally B. saw her shoulders lift and tremble, and flew to her, comforting her with a love that Stella knew would never fail. When Alvin came at midnight the hotel was dark and silent. Not a glimmer of light came from behind the curtains where Sally B. watched with wet eyes while Stella drove away, her head turned toward that window as long as she could see it.

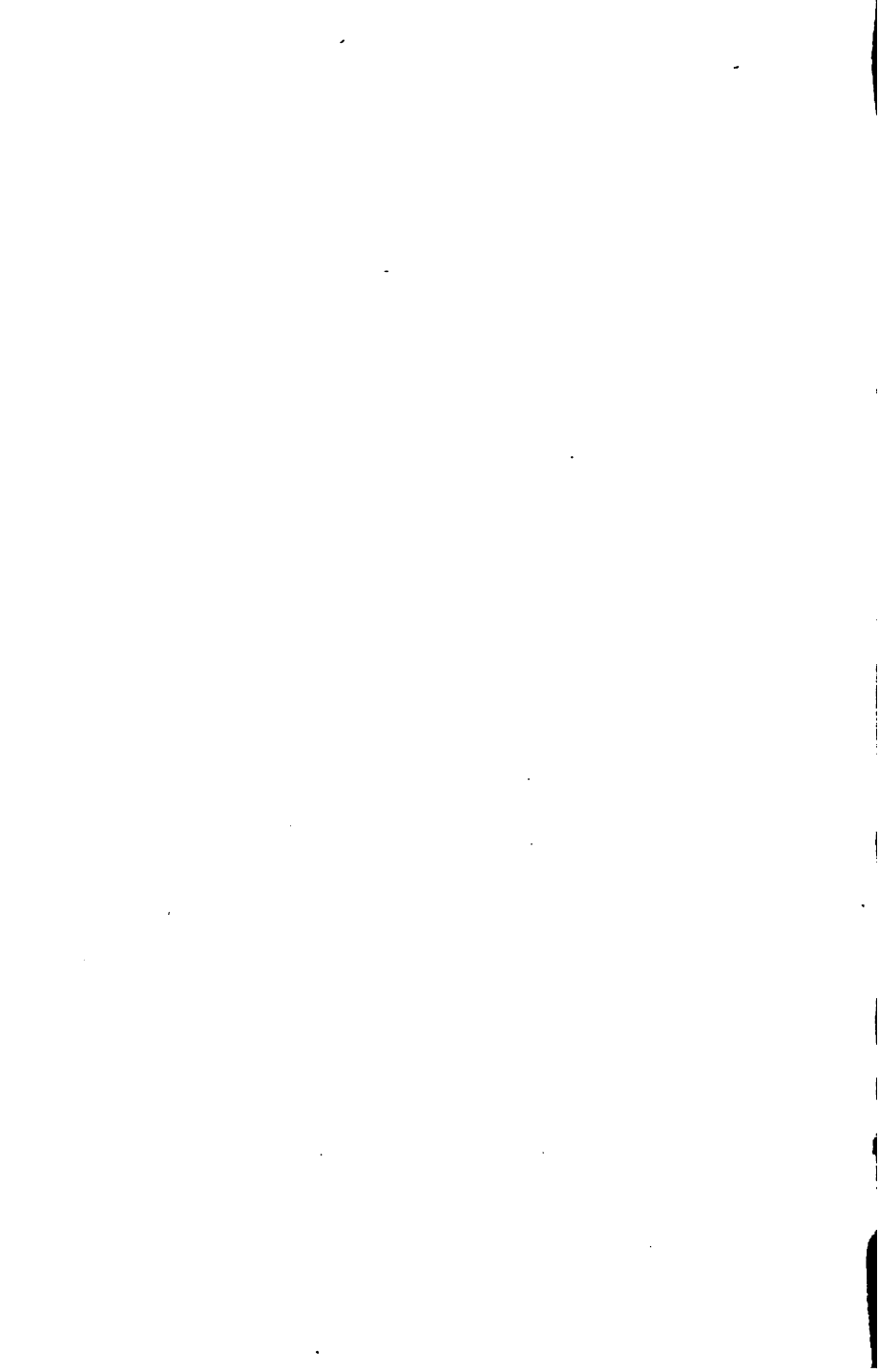
Out of town, where the dim, dusty road paralleled the railroad, they passed a long line of shadowy figures marching silently toward town.

"Those are the new men," Alvin whispered. "By hooky! Every man has a gun! Them strikers better take to their heels. Lord! There's going to be a scrimmage, and I can't be there!"

Stella smiled fleetingly at the unconscious regret in the young voice.

An engine and two box-cars stood on the track. "Won't some one discover this train and learn our plans too soon?" Yet even as Stella spoke, the engine puffed, and with no warning whistle, sped into the west toward Sacramento; and Alvin and Stella held right of way over the lonely road.

The next morning Sally B. joined her excited conjectures with the most eager of the questioning gossips. And none who listened to her lurid remarks upon Stella's flight dreamed that her aching heart was following the solitary, fleeing girl.



PART TWO

CHAPTER I

THE PROMISE KEPT

ALFRED came downstairs to Mrs. Harmon's spacious parlor. It was a homelike room, in spite of luxury and artistic furnishings, filled with the spirit of childhood, in picture, statue, and ornamentation; and it proclaimed the heart of the home-keeper even before one met her. Into this home Alfred stepped again, hardly feeling the break the years had made. It lacked some minutes of the dinner hour, and he hoped for a cosey chat before the Judge came in. At least, he felt sure of the few minutes it took the Judge to scramble, grumbling, into his detested evening clothes.

Mrs. Harmon entered, a stately, white-haired woman in creamy, shimmering satin, whose merry eyes belied the somewhat stern mouth. A child would have run unhesitatingly to her arms; an evil-doer would have faltered before the mysterious barrier of her courageous rectitude.

"Alfred!" She was beside him in front of the fire before he was aware of her presence. "How good it is to see you! Oh, but you're changed!" She looked him over critically, yet in a breath. "You have

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acquired tan, a few—just a few—lines, and a business face. It is all becoming, though, the tan, the lines, and—and the business face,” she added hesitatingly. “You’re a trifle stouter, are n’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“That’s good. You were too thin. How sorry I am to have been away when you arrived! It was so inhospitable.”

“It’s very good to be here, to see you after this long time. And don’t trouble a minute about not being here to receive me. Toy is a whole domestic retinue. He took me to my old chamber, and fussed about delightfully.”

“Yes, Toy is my right-hand man, half my house-keeping brain.”

“It is like home, even to the heliotrope on the stand. How good of you to remember my favorite flower.”

He glanced swiftly around the quiet room, bringing his eyes again to her calm face. He felt welcomed, warmed, his heart lighter. This beautiful home was like his own, ample, refined; and its genius stood on a pedestal beside the memory of his mother. He wished she might put her arms around him as his own mother would have done. He was weary and worn beyond his years; tired of the rough life that, much as it stirred his ambition, left unsatisfied the desire for the intellectual and artistic things he had loved. He wished, too, for the calm security of home, for the daily courtesies, the leisurely give and take of family chat, jest, and caress. He had never tried to satisfy

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this hunger by proxy, as many young men of his acquaintance did, by cheap endearments for any girl in any town who cared for a transient love affair. Even his moments with Stella had been so few, so fleeting! And they were only a memory now!

"Flattering of Toy," Mrs. Harmon replied to his last remark; "you were a favorite of his. I can't claim credit for any such definite memory of your tastes. I'm afraid I've forgotten even the songs you liked me to sing; but I shall never forget some of yours. I can hear you now as on that first night when you sang 'Down Upon the Swanee River,' as if God had turned you out of heaven."

"I thought he had then; I know better now."

"Because you have gained it since?"

"Yes, and lost it again. I think I know—a little about—Hades." He was looking down, and quite unaware of the dejection in his voice.

"You poor boy!" She stepped closer and put her hand on his arm. "You must tell me, when you're in the mood, of that trying experience. It must have been dreadful!"

"The kidnapping? Oh, yes, that was pretty bad; and the long illness after;—but here! What a silly I am to unload my troubles before I've given you a decent how-do-you-do! That's what I used to do to my mother at home in—" He trusted his voice no farther.

"I'm your mother in California, you know," she said softly.

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He lifted her hand from his arm and kissed it reverently.

"Alfred, dear, I understand. Because you've been so long from things you need, have missed things, perhaps, that I don't know of, my sympathy has undone you. Some other time, when no guests are coming, forget that I'm not your own mother, and tell me all your heart. Meantime, brighten up. The very dearest of my many girls is to be here to-night. I've been wishing you might meet her. She's a beautiful woman, a heroine, too,—Miss Anthony."

Alfred started, and his lips straightened instantly. "Stella Anthony?" he asked thickly.

"No, Esther Anthony," Mrs. Harmon answered, noting his agitation. "She's not one you'd take the liberty of nicknaming. Sit down, Alfred, and let me tell you of her."

"Is she large, rosy, with red-gold-brown hair, very light, a dozen—all the colors of the sunset in it?" In spite of attempted control, his words trembled with eagerness as he pushed forward a chair for Mrs. Harmon, and seated himself opposite her.

"Oh, no! She's queenly tall, but slender; an elegant figure."

Alfred winced at Mrs. Harmon's implied mental vision of Stella.

"Her complexion is—certainly not rosy; yet she has a lovely color, what one might, perhaps, call warmly pale. Her hair is wonderful. All the smoothing and pulling of the horrid fashion cannot banish the wave from it. Dark brown it is, almost black at

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night. In the sun it has rusty tints, shining threads. I'm sure you never knew her. She's just back from Vassar, and from abroad."

"And where had she lived before that?" Alfred asked, eager yet, though hope was dying.

"Here in San Francisco. Oh, yes; out of town at the resorts in summer. I first met her two years ago last May in Calistoga. You mustn't think less of her, Alfred—she waited at our table."

"A waitress? And Vassar? I don't understand."

"No, of course not. It would take days to tell the strange and fine things I know of her. We both fell in love with her, the Judge and myself. She was working her way through school."

"Yes," Alfred answered absently.

"She has an exceptional mind. The Judge was very greatly interested in her."

"I begin to see how Miss Anthony accomplished Vassar. She—"

"But you don't see. She's not a *protégée*, but one of the richest women in the city; and quite the rage, though she returned less than a month ago."

Alfred's hope glimmered away to oblivion. His heart had sung Stella's name through all the conversation; yet nothing of this woman's life or looks tallied with Stella. And what if she were Stella? All the obstacles that had separated them when she was unknown and friendless would be infinitely augmented, now that she was rich and courted; and his own situation unchanged. Still, if she were Stella,—oh, if she were Stella!

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"All the Judge did was to manage her mining property," Mrs. Harmon went on, "mines she had owned for years, but supposed worthless. So they were until the railroad made the valley of the Humboldt accessible."

"That was fortunate for her. Has she finished school?" His question was merely polite. He grudged the time to this unknown Miss Anthony, when he had scarcely begun upon the mutual and delightful confidences waiting to be exchanged.

"Yes, graduated with honors last Spring. You should have taken her in to dinner if I had known you were coming; but I've promised her to Mr. Montague. She's—"

"Hello, Vincent! Here you are, making love to my wife again! Beginning right where you left off three years ago, I suppose, you young scamp!" The Judge rolled in, fat, puffing and red with the exertion of hasty dressing; yet a man whose leonine head and kind, fearless eyes would arrest the most casual observer. From the security of perfect trust in his wife, his perennial jokes concerning her youthful lovers were looked for by each young man fortunate enough to possess the privilege of visiting there. They were a certain and necessary welcome, a sort of password to the inner, intimate delights of this home, a home that had been open to the homeless ever since the day when San Francisco was a city of tents.

"Is n't it good to have Alfred here again?" she asked, as the two shook hands heartily.

"Of course you think so! 'Most any woman would

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enjoy this spruce young chap. Never mind the old man, Vincent. I don't blame you. She's a pretty nice sort of an old girl, is n't she? I'm in love with her myself. I—"

"George, you've twisted your tie. Let me change it," Mrs. Harmon interrupted, rising to adjust the knot under the fat, shaven chin, giving it a tender pat or two for a finish. "I do wish you'd get you a man; or—let me help you."

"A man!" he snorted. "When I can't dress myself to suit you, madam, I'll resign! Blast all this toggery, anyhow! Spike-tail coats, dinner in the middle of the night— Don't marry, Vincent, or you'll be tied for life to just such petticoat tyranny."

"I've been accustomed to it in my youth, sir, all except dinner at night; that's new to me."

"It's the proper time to dine—at the close of day—the only time; when there's leisure for guests, enjoyment, *and* digestion. As for 'petticoat tyranny,'" Mrs. Harmon smiled indulgently, "what would the Judge's social position be with no wife to manage him? Why, he'd go with one pump and a boot to a ball! In a dressing-gown, too, perhaps, if some sane person did n't look after him."

The Judge flung her a merry rejoinder, and turned kind eyes to Alfred. "Mother, the boy's grown!"

Why the Judge called his wife "mother" was a mystery to their friends. The more observant noticed that he used the name only when moved; seers read in it undying regret for the son that came but never breathed.

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"Yes, it's true, Judge," Alfred acknowledged. "In spite of hardship and roughing it, I've laid on flesh."

The bell rang.

"There are the rest of the diners! Come on, Vincent, into the den with me. There'll be time for a good talk before the madam's train and Toy are ready for dining-room conjunction. I want to hear by eyewitness from the Front."

The two went into a large rear room overlooking the Bay, the Golden Gate, Sausalito straggling down the Marin County hills to the shore, Tamalpais, and all the rest of the blue and golden-brown panorama unrolled before them in eternal beauty.

Alfred declined cigars, but the Judge smoked serenely, quite indifferent to the nearing dinner hour.

"Tell me, how's the iron horse race coming on out there in the sage-brush? Crocker and Gregory getting in on the last heat?"

"Yes, sir; they're making fair time," Alfred replied, bringing his eyes back to the Judge from a quick survey of the room, which, in its furnishings, was a historic record of California since the Judge's early days in Monterey, when that city was the capital, and Pio Pico governor under Mexican rule. "They expected to be at Salt Lake City in the Spring, but they've had to change the route, you know, to the north end of the lake."

"Yes; on account of the great swamps, they said. Was that necessary? It cuts out a pile of good territory."

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"They decided it was necessary. The *détour* would carry the road far out of line, and take too long. Our Company has already lapped the Union Pacific grade; still, it is uphill work; they can't build as fast as they ought."

"The refusal of the Government to accept that hundred miles of Union Pacific road will delay them; I'm glad of that."

"But it has n't. Those people are rushing right along, regardless of Uncle Sam's disapproval."

"My stars! It's a crying shame this State's so niggardly with her appropriations. Look at Missouri! She issued railroad bonds in 1852 to the amount of over twenty-four millions; and in six years her taxable property had increased two hundred millions. Illinois has an even better record. Yet California does nothing but sit back and sick the dogs on private pluck!" The Judge frowned and puffed audibly before resuming. "Our folks surprised those U. P. chaps some, I expect, when we caught up with their west section of grade. What possessed the Union Pacific people to begin grading as far west as Humboldt Wells? They're poor calculators."

"There's a secret about that, sir. Did Mr. Crocker never tell you of Mr. Gregory's understudy?"

"Understudy? What of him?"

"Last Autumn, when our people were pegging along near Winnemucca, a stranger came to Gregory wishing to study railroading at its latest and best; said he was contemplating an Oregon enterprise; completely fooled the old man."

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"Fooled Gregory!" The Judge's laugh shook him as a craft tossed by a high wind.

"Yes, sir. The fellow was a U. P. spy. He went back by way of San Francisco and the Isthmus, and told his people we could n't get to Salt Lake before '71. You should have heard Gregory's remarks. Good for indigestion."

"But how came the spy to be so out of reckoning?" asked the Judge, grinning appreciatively.

"Based his calculations on the Palisade tunnel. That would have taken a good year."

"And our folks changed their minds and walked around it. Bully! What does Gregory say now?"

"Oh, that's history to him. He's busy driving his white men and Chinese like a modern Pharaoh."

"By hokey! It was lucky for us, that brag Durrant made."

"Durrant?" Alfred questioned absently. His mind was wandering with Stella in the past, her memory vividly aroused by Mrs. Harmon's description of her *protégée*.

"Yes. Did n't you hear of it? Vice-President Durrant of the Union Pacific telegraphed Stanford this: 'If we lay any track on your grading we'll pay you for your grading. If you lay any on ours we won't charge you a cent.' We'll get them on that deal."

"Yes, sir; and it's lucky for us that ownership terminates where the iron meets instead of where the grades meet."

"Iron! That's the keynote! I wish we could act on Gregory's wish and get iron out across the Isthmus."

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"It would be like spiking down silver track," Alfred said wonderingly.

"You bet! But we're making railroad for a thousand years! Every mile we build now will in time pay for Isthmus-packed iron—yes, for silver track!"

Alfred nodded, but was silent.

"Exciting times out there now?" the Judge questioned.

"Indeed, yes, sir. You should take a run over to the Front."

"I've wanted to, but could n't. Guess I'll make it this month, though. I'll take the madam and Esther. It will be a sensation for them."

Toy, velvet-footed, and exquisite in his waiter's garb, came to the door. "Missee Ha'mon likee see Judge, Mistee Vincen', in pa'lah," he said softly.

The Judge rose slowly and flipped the cigar ashes from his coat. "Good-bye, comfort. Come on, boy. She's the general, you know."

In the parlor Alfred was barely introduced to the other guests, when through the hall archway Miss Anthony appeared. He stopped in the middle of a speech and stared open-mouthed. It was Stella!

He took a quick step forward, but halted. This was not his Stella. She dwelt only in memory, in the far, fragrant mountains. His long, fruitless search for her flashed upon him, his months, years of longing. Surely she had not wished to be found. He looked again at the stately woman before him. No, no; this was not his Stella.

Esther's entrance had immediately focussed atten-

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tion. Alfred was glad that his perturbation had thus gone unnoticed. He took shelter behind a pillar and covertly followed her movements.

She was taller than before, he thought; and she carried herself regally. Her gown was white; and save the crimson rose drooping from her hair, the rich dress was relieved only by a string of priceless pearls, the most beautiful Alfred had ever seen.

Gayly, with perfect ease, she greeted her hosts; and from their faces Alfred read the depth of their affection. Guests went forward to meet her, till she was encircled. Turning this way and that to make her replies, Alfred fancied she sent a fleeting glance his way. But before there was time for further speculation, dinner was announced; and in the slight confusion of finding partners, Esther, passing, looked at him without recognition.

CHAPTER II

BEHIND HER MASK

ALFRED sat at Mrs. Harmon's left, Esther at the left of the host. She thus had opportunity to study him leisurely. His face had been the first she saw on entering the parlor, her eyes drawn, perhaps, by his intense gaze. His quick movement toward her, his sudden halt, the step behind the pillar, she had noticed every motion; had believed then that her own unresponsive look caused that withdrawal. Yet now, noting Amabel Hamilton's attitude, she fancied her own share in his life and heart must have dwindled to mere curiosity. She could not know how frequently Amabel went with her uncle over the road; nor how, whenever she happened upon Alfred, the only woman of his class he ever met outside of his few visits to the cities, the occasion was inevitably a welcome oasis in his desert life.

Between perfunctory replies to Mr. Montague Esther recalled the weeks of suspense after her flight, when she had waited in vain for some news of Alfred's safety; the meagre newspaper notice of his long illness in the hospital; the search he had made for her by way of letters that she had asked Sally B. to return unopened. How she had longed to read them! After that the printed personals, the detective she had so hardly escaped,—would the dear Father forgive

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her many equivocations? Oh, Alfred had been tireless. His love, then, was true. There followed in her mind fleeting, half-formed pictures of those after-days of ceaseless toil, long nights of study. Would she have survived if Mrs. Harmon had not found her?

And Gideon — she caught herself up firmly. This was no time for retrospect. Her eyes travelled back to Alfred. For the first time she saw his entire face, decided she liked the story told in the square chin, strong enough to bear its feminine cleft; in the fearless violet eyes, black now in the night light; in the power and self-control the years had written into every feature. Yet an unfamiliar sadness about the mouth set her to speculating concerning his relations with Amabel.

“Speaking of stocks, the wildest plunger on the Board is Bernard,” the Judge said, some one having brought up the topic.

The name arrested Esther’s attention.

“I don’t know how much he has behind him,” the Judge continued. “I’m told they live as if it was a good chunk. It’ll have to be, if it stands the calls he makes on it.”

“Is n’t he lucky?” Esther asked with quick interest.

“Sometimes.” The Judge’s tone left her solicitous.

“He’s a rough old galoot,” Mr. Montague said; “but genuine for all that.”

“His daughter’s a thoroughbred, if he is n’t,” Phineas Cadwallader asserted.

“She’s surely not their own daughter,” the Judge’s dinner partner exclaimed positively. “She can’t be. She has n’t a trait like either of them.”

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"Oh, but she is, though, and a mighty pretty girl, whoever she's like," the Judge said, shooting a sly glance at his wife. "That's why my wife won't ask her here."

"Nonsense, Judge! You know I have a reason. That's none at all. As if the young men would let you claim attention from that lovely Miss Moneybags!"

"Oh, but she's lovely aside from her money," Amabel said sweetly.

"I know she is; yet what of her mother?"

"Why, she's the most amusing Mrs. Malaprop outside of a Sheridan comedy. Good as gold, too," Amabel replied.

"True," Mrs. Harmon rejoined. "She's too good for guests of mine to flee at. And I won't insult the mother by inviting Miss Viola alone."

"You see? Is n't she cunning?" the Judge queried with assumed solemnity. "She always has a virtuous reason for curtailing my pleasures."

"You could n't have had her to-night, anyway, Judge. They are n't back from Calistoga."

It was Phineas who spoke. The men jeered him openly, for his pursuit of Viola had waxed and waned with her father's success in stocks.

"Call them off, please, Mrs. Harmon! For my mother's sake!"

"There are some things impossible even to my love for my old school friend," Mrs. Harmon replied. Esther saw in the look, as well as in the speech, the secret of Phineas Cadwallader's presence in this house.

"The Sacramento 'Clarion' made an extra severe

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case against the Central Pacific in yesterday's editorial," Mr. Montague said in a lull in the talk.

"That's nothing new. I didn't see it, though. What was it?" The Judge's tone was brusque.

"The paper arraigned the Company for refusing to receive and carry merchants' freight; declared that President Johnson would not, and should not, issue bonds to the Company till their methods and business were thoroughly investigated; declared also that the Company was composed of men determined to get rich at the expense of others."

"Great Scott!" the Judge burst forth. "I wish the Company would buy out that calamity-howling 'Clarion'! Put 'em out of business! Our people are fighting against a hundred odds—lack of time, lack of iron, lack of everything! And the Union Pacific coming west like—well, two-forty!" He scowled and smiled at the same time down the table at his wife. "The State, this city, the 'Clarion,' all who should be their proud friends fighting 'em, Injun fashion, in the back! The last outrage is the Goat Island proposition. It's the very spot for a terminus, but these blooming chumps are going to beat the Company out of it. Worse yet, this city refuses them land for their depots."

"I'm sure the Company will manage to obtain depot room," Alfred said. And Esther, looking past Mr. Montague, saw a malevolence that chilled her creep into Phineas's face.

The Judge was not to be diverted from his topic.

"The Company has more than it can do to move its

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own material. It's a wonder they won't stop work to haul gold watches and silk stockings to Nevada, now, ain't it? Getting rich at the expense of others, are they? It strikes me the Big Four have come nearer creating their own wealth than anybody; just built it out of God's own capital, pluck and unpreempted terra firma!"

"Hurrah, Judge Harmon! I wish Uncle Charley could hear you!" Amabel clapped her pretty hands.

"Do you know why the 'Clarion' hates the Central Pacific generally, and Governor Stanford specifically?" Phineas questioned of the Judge.

Judge Harmon shook his head noncommittally; but Mr. Montague hazarded a guess. "Because the Company's figure is n't high enough?"

"You're away off there, Montague," the Judge interposed. "All the money in the Nevada Bank could n't buy Norris or Bevins. They have no price."

"I think they did have," Phineas said quietly.

"Hey?" The Judge looked up sharply. "By Jove! Cad's got a story. Out with it, man. Earn your dinner!"

"Some years ago," Phineas began after a slight hesitation, "I worked in the 'Clarion' office long enough to learn something of the two men who do as much to shape issues in this State, perhaps, as any other two living. Do you think I'm right, Judge?"

"You're not so far wrong as I wish you were, Cad."

"I never saw any one who could flip the ivory and the pasteboard to beat Norris, or Bevins, either; or

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any two who could look more like preachers when they were at it. But once in their editorial rooms, they changed coats; and the paper stands, as it has always stood, for the best side of life."

"Till they turned against the railroad," Mr. Montague interrupted.

Phineas nodded and went on. "You know, the 'Clarion' was solid for the Company from the first day's work clear up to the time when success appeared certain; then the paper suddenly became the Company's worst enemy. One day, not long after the first mountain fifty miles had been accepted, I was in the 'Clarion' office correcting proof for some Company printing, when I heard the two editors and the Governor enter the outer office. They were in earnest conversation, but it never occurred to me to let them know of my presence,—I was only a cog in the machine to them,—till I had heard so much I had to keep still.

"And now we claim compensation,' Norris was saying as they entered.

"But, gentlemen, your request is impossible,' the Governor replied. 'We have no such block of stock to spare to you.'

"You discriminate in the disposal of your stock, do you?' Norris sneered.

"We claim that right,' the Governor said quietly.

"Yet you acknowledge the 'Clarion's' part as a factor in your success?"

"Yes, we do,' the Governor assented, still self-controlled; though even where I was I could feel lightning in the air.

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“‘Then what are your reasons for denying us a share of the plum we ’ve helped you pick from the Government tree?’ I fancied I could see the blue sparks snapping from Bevins’s eyes.

“‘Gentlemen, my associates,’—I knew something was going to break loose then,—‘my associates, Mr. Huntington, Mr. Hopkins, and Mr. Crocker, with myself have made a compact never to gamble, in stocks or in any other way; never to become connected with men or enterprises that can possibly jeopard our great undertaking. You would gamble the hair off your heads! You shall never gamble with the Central Pacific Railroad stock so long as we four, or any one of us, hold a controlling interest. That’s all.’ In the instant of silence that followed I heard him turn toward the door. The others were breathing as hard as a stage team.

“Then the two partners tried to bribe the Governor with a string of temptations that would have made the Devil’s layout on the high mountain look like a dime with a hole in it.

“‘Perhaps you don’t know that Norris and I are planning to make you United States Senator,’ Bevins said insinuatingly as a last hot-shot.

“‘I’ll be Senator without any of your help!’ the Governor sent back at them savagely. ‘Gentlemen, your request is useless. You shall never have a chance to wreck the Central Pacific Railroad.’

“I’d have given a *chassez* down the golden streets to have seen the two faces that looked into the Governor’s just then. It was Norris who spoke first.

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'We'll send your road to—Hades!' But that is n't the name he gave the place.

"'Yes,' Bevins said, with more profanity; 'we'll fight you till you haven't a rail or a rag to your backs!'

"'I'll see you both dead in the poorhouse first!' the Governor shot back at them, and was gone."

"By George!" the Judge exclaimed. "Norris and Bevins are doing pretty well for their threat; but the Governor's will come true first, or I'm no prophet."

"Please don't talk shop any more, Judge. The railroad will win, of course, even against such a power as the 'Clarion'; for Governor Stanford and his company stand for destiny as well as for their own success. Let's go into the parlor and have some music." Mrs. Harmon rose as she finished.

"If the madame says we're to win, it's booked by fate, and no need for worry. And she's the supreme court here, judge and jury." The Judge pushed his chair back reluctantly. "She always separates folks just when they've spotted a good time," he grumbled amiably to the women on either side of him; and, with a comprehensive glance at the men, went on. "However, I'll beat her on one point; I'll go bail for those that would rather stop in my den for a smoke than serve out sentence in the parlor." He rose and slid back the old-fashioned, glass-panelled, walnut-framed door, giving Esther an affectionate look as she passed through.

Phineas was the only one who accepted bail, and the smoke was short. Alfred was singing when the

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two men entered the parlor, and Esther saw again the malignant gleam Phineas sent the unconscious singer.

By a ruse that cost him some time to perfect, Mr. Montague succeeded in sequestering Esther in the bay window. There he held her by an interminable story that would have been good if it had not been diluted for time's sake. As Alfred finished his song he noticed the two seated apart.

Esther saw his look, and turned a more interested face to Mr. Montague, heart and brain throbbing wildly with the old love she had thought dead, or safely asleep. Would she meet him often? How, oh, how should she be able to show him ever a placid face? From beneath her lowered lids she saw him hesitate, glance again toward her, then at Mrs. Harmon, who was still at the piano, and finally drift across the room to the snare of Amabel's alluring eyes. And Esther, reading those eyes, scoffed at her own fears.

Presently she rose and went forward to her hostess.

"I'm sorry to go so early, Mrs. Harmon; but Mrs. Snow insisted, even if I did n't arrive till after the play began. I fear it will be half over; yet there's supper,—they'll have enough of me, I think."

She passed around the room with a gracious farewell for each guest, as a daughter might have done. And Alfred, watching, acknowledged with a pang that Esther outshone his most ambitious dreams for his Stella of the long ago.

Pausing before Amabel and Alfred, she made some

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bright, impersonal remark that included them both, bowed, and, with a smiling good-bye, moved on toward the hall door, where the Judge awaited her.

Both Phineas and Mr. Montague pressed forward, but the Judge warned them back. "No, you don't! Not one o' you young sprigs shall cheat me out of my good-night kiss. But you need n't grudge me; you would n't get it."

The door closed on them, and a moment later Esther was speeding to her next engagement. Her face had been radiant, her demeanor faultless. Even Amabel, the self-satisfied, had all but envied Esther's beauty, her distinction, her fortune. But in the carriage a pale weary girl looked out into the dark and lived over again that before-dawn scene in Sally B.'s railroad hotel; whispering again—

"My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have; for both are infinite."

CHAPTER III

SALLY B. CULTIVATES ARISTOCRACY

ESTHER stood at the door of the Bernard mansion in Oakland. Sally B. was crossing the hall when the colored butler opened the door.

"Oh, honey! Stell—Esther, I mean!" She flew down the hall and caught the girl in a vigorous embrace. "I've been dying to see you ever sence—sence I read in the paper you'd got back from your tower. Come right up to my boodwar."

"I only learned last week, at Judge Harmon's, where you were," Esther said as soon as released. "You've been away most of the time lately, and this is my first opportunity to come since you returned from the springs. Why Calistoga in the Winter, of all places?"

Sally B. was fussing about happily, helping her out of her wraps. "Vi's ben peaked lately, an' I took her up fur—for the sulphur water. That's good in the Spring, you know."

"Yes; but February?"

"Oh, well, any time near Valentine's Day's Spring around the Bay. Stella! You've growed tall, and that elegant!"

"Grown, madame," interrupted a quiet voice.

Esther glanced curiously at a demure figure sewing in a corner of the elaborate room.

"I've been—been turribly im—"

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"Terribly, madame."

Esther saw a shade of annoyance pass over Sally B.'s face; but she went on again.

"I've been terribly impatient to show you my new house and our gold-plated traps."

"I'm sure I'm just as impatient to see them all. How long have you been here?"

"We bought a little better'n eight months ago,—got a bargain. It only cost us—"

"Private expenses tabooed subject," the even voice broke in; though the girl never lifted her eyes from her work, nor showed the slightest interest in the conversation.

Sally B. turned swiftly, shot an angry glance at the young woman, and opened her lips with a spring that Esther well remembered. Yet her anger faded quickly. "Thank you, Marie," she said, and continued. "Set—sit down, Esther. I bet you'll have a—"

"'I bet' is not quite elegant, madame."

Sally B. whirled on her heel in quite the old way. "Marie, you git!"

The girl rose and walked quietly out of the room. Before the door closed Sally B. was calm again. "There I go," she said. "That's two dollars she gits—gets to-day, an' it ain't—is n't two o'clock."

Esther did not try to conceal her laugh. "Two dollars for what?"

"For my bad language. I hired her to keep Vi up in her French, but mostly to correct my bad grammar. I pay her twenty-five a month, and a dollar every time I say slangy things to her. She's gittin'—getting rich!"

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"I should think she'd retire when visitors arrive," Esther ventured.

"Her orders is— Say! do you say 'orders is,' or 'are'?"

"'Are,' I think." Esther struggled with a too persistent smile.

"Her orders are to stick to me like a cockle burr to a mule's tail; let up for nobody except when I receive big bugs in the parlor. An' I'm sorry for her, that I am."

"How long has she been with you?"

"Oh, ever since we bought."

"She's had time, then, to learn your good heart. If she has n't, she deserves no sympathy."

Sally B. smiled broadly. "You tuck—took in the blarney stone on your tower, did n't you? What a plaguy shame we could n't have towered together!"

"That would have been nice. Did you enjoy your travel?"

"Fine!" the other answered quickly; yet a dejected note crept into her next words. "I enjoyed it all right; but it did n't pay,—not Bill an' me. We're too old, and did n't have no—any fit cultivating for such a crop. But it paid for Vi," she said exultingly. "She's come out just a little queen, Vi has. She fits all this fine stuff!" Sally B.'s sweep of arm included the whole magnificent villa. "An' her paw's that proud of her!"

Esther smiled sympathetically. "Tell me about your home, Mrs. Sally. How do you like it?"

"Oh, it's pay rock, sure; a thousand dollars to the

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ton. But some way, I like it better when I'm tellin' about it, or showin' it off, than I do just livin' in it. You know, I ain't used to bein' waited on—not personal—but I'm going to get used to it for Vi's sake; style, furrin servants—got five kinds, seven courses, church people,—the hull hog!”

“Did you get the place already equipped?”

“Law me, yes. Furniture, horses, coachman, an' monnygram. They left a cook, too, a Frenchy; but I bounced him, fy, fy; an' Yic Wah hangs up in the kitchen now. Gosh! I— Say! I'm just going to take a vacation from grammar while you're here; it's too hamperin'. No use showin' off to you, Stel—Esther; you know me from shoe to bonnet, anyhow.”

“I don't love you for your grammar, good or bad, but for—I won't risk another reference to—to my travel in Ireland. How's Yic Wah?”

“Proud of the place as if he owned it. Come! I'll show you everything; him an' the kitchen with the rest.”

She led the way, trailing her black skirts over the rich carpets from room to room, holding her head high, and showing off her possessions with pleased pride. The house was large, and in perfect taste. The former owners had failed suddenly, and sold to the first bidder, walking out with only their clothing. The two women halted in the library; and Esther looked curiously along the rows of books, most of them standard authors, and bound to order, with the owner's monogram on the cover. She

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wondered what part they played in Sally B.'s present life. "Have you read any of them?" she asked, glancing at the shelves.

A tired look crept into Sally B.'s face. "I've got to the sixth book on the fourth row from the top. I reckon it'll take about two year—years. Vi likes 'em, but I don't,—leastways, not much of it."

Esther refrained from comment, though her heart ached for the heroic woman. "It's too bad about the monogram. L. B.'s so near right."

"It's just right! I've took—taken maw's name, Lang. See here!" She crossed the room and brought cards from the desk. They were in the extremest style, and read, "Mrs. Lang-Bernard. Lake View. First Thursday."

"Think o' Sally B. bein' that big a fool! But that's what you got to do if you want to git—get up; an' that's where I'm bound, to the very top notch! Of course, I don't b'long there, but Vi does, an' I'm going to boost her if money an' work can do it." She was leading the way to the ball-room at the top of the house, a beautiful, spacious apartment overlooking Lake Merritt and the Berkeley Hills.

"I'm sure you're succeeding," Esther said as they sat near an open window. She wondered if it was wise to encourage Sally B.'s impossible ambitions.

"Yes; that is, Vi is. She gits invited into the gинуine, bong tong set, where the men wears opery hats an' gold-headed canes, an' the women's all ladies."

"Does Viola enjoy it?"

Sally B.'s face sobered instantly. "I don't know.

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Vi's changed some. She was always quiet; now she's deep. I can't make her out. She goes a heap, always does the right thing, wears her clo'es like a queen, she does. And Freddy Bryan,—he's old Dick Bryan's son, you know; the old man's on his third million now; an' they're fust families, O.K.—well, Freddy's shinin; up to Vi fine! Then there's Mr. Reginald Lawrence; they say he's really a lord's son. I kin see 't he likes Vi, but he's one o' them stand-off English fellers; you can't tell about 'em. Cut my—if Vi'd ketch a lord—" She stopped and beamed on Esther.

"But he might not make Viola happy."

"N—o," Sally B. acquiesced reluctantly. "Anyway, he's shy lately. Reckon he's waiting to size up Bill's pile." Sally B.'s honesty extended to herself, no matter how unflattering. "Vi's nineteen next week," she went on. "She's goin' to have the doggondest ball,—invitations ben out a week—on silk, they are. An' I've staked out the best decorator an' the best caterer round the Bay."

"Whom have you invited—besides me? I received my invitation safely."

"Oh, all the big bugs—all the other big bugs," Sally B. smiled at Esther, "I kin git. All that's called on me, an' a lot that hain't. The 'Piscopal church folks, too; they're bong tong, all right."

They discussed the ball a little more, when Esther asked suddenly, "What of Alvin? Haven't you let those two meet again?"

The other woman's countenance fell. "I reckon

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Vi still likes him. But how can I let my little thoroughbred marry that cripple? An' if he wa' n't crooked, he's nobody, no more'n I be. Vi's got to go up! You hear me! She's bound to go up!" She rose and walked down the room, stopping by another window an instant before she returned. "She ain't seen Al in two year."

Esther saw the battle between love and ambition, and said nothing. Poor Viola! Must she be sacrificed? Esther knew that the crooked leg would be condoned if Alvin had a hyphenated name or a long purse.

"Come on down to my room," Sally B. said presently; "I want to show you my clo'es. Oh, that's my church, St. Andrew's." She stopped on the stair, and pointed out an ivy-hung building of unmistakable Episcopalian architecture.

"So you go to church?" There was surprise in Esther's tone.

"Reg'lar as eatin'."

"It seems odd someway." Esther looked speculatively at Sally B.

"Course. I wa' n't raised to it,—been miles from churches all my life. But it's the proper caper, an' I go the hull thing, you know. Then if they's anything in it, runnin' in droves'll stampede the Devil better'n goin' single. I must say I ain't plumb figgered it out, though. As fur worshippin' God, well, the organ an' the big choir, an' the minister in his Sunday night-gownd, an' the big room, short on light an' long on people,—it's soberin' an' pretty. But if

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the people don't git more out of it than I reckon God does, 't ain't much. I don't 'low God's sufferin' to hear our primy donnas, when all his angel singers's hangin' round."

Esther asked Sally B. how she liked her fellow parishioners.

"'T ain't no matter how I like them. What I've started to do is to make them like me. But it's no go. They'll take to Vi, an' to my money; but they'll never swaller me."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, they eat my dinners; say they're splendid. An' they invite me to their'n. But most gene'ally it's Bill an' Vi an' me a-playin' a lone hand fur visitors. Or if they's other folks, they wink an' tech—touch one another when I talk. They think I don't size 'em up; but I ain't a durn fool all the time, if they do bleed me like thunder."

"Bleed you?"

"You bet! They think they do it slick, an' I don't let on, but just give, give, to all kinds of missionaries, an' all kinds of poor boxes, till I wonder how much they pay the man that invents so many ways."

"I can imagine how generous you are," Esther said approvingly.

"There's one piece of work they let me run my own way, an' I like it; that's looking after the poor. Someway, I can understand them folks; tell whether it's grub or a boost o' the sperit they need most. I s'pose we're right smart happier with folks that needs us. That's why I ain't—well, not exactly hilarious

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with the big bugs; they don't need nothin' I got—except my daughter.”

Esther sighed. Did any one in all the world need her? “How does Mr. Bernard like the new home?” she asked, stepping across the room for another view of the beautiful grounds.

“Oh, like me, bang up. Yet what you 're raised to don't git out of the blood in a minute. An' I know Bill dreams at night of the mountains an' the mines, 'cause he hollers out in his sleep about 'em.”

She was busy bringing from hook and shelf and drawer a billowy flood of heterogeneous finery. Her tongue voiced a new mood; and Esther, not without sympathy for the “big bugs,” recognized Sally [B.'s company manner.

“This here is made by Worth of Paree. I hope it will be worth as much to me as it was to him. Ain't it orfay? And here's one that's just magnif! I brought them all over myself,—wore 'em all first to save duty. My! But maybe you think 't wa' n't no job to flop around a hotel parlor in a new dress four times a day! Whew! It makes me sweat now to think of it! Ain't that red just—”

“Regal!” Esther finished, as Sally B., for a wonder, paused for a word.

“Like it?” Sally B. displayed with pride the scarlet satin robe, spangled from hem to throat, and finished with costly gold lace. “That's my own design, an' my favorite of all I got. Worth told me never to tell it was his make. Would n't put his tag on it. Did n't want to steal my thunder, I s'pose.

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Clever of him, wa' n't it? Say! With my diamonds — they 're in the bank or I 'd show 'em to you — I look — ”

“We 've used the only word, Mrs. Sally,—regal,” Esther laughed, thinking of her at a fancy dress ball as the Queen of Sheba.

“Oh, what a pretty thing this is!” she said, lifting a pale gray gown from the filmy heap.

“Yes, I s'pose the toot onsembl of that 's good. But them pale colors don't fit me; an' the work on that won't stand the eyes of a connishoner.”

“I suppose Mr. Bernard has a lot of things, too,” Esther said as soon as she could control her face.

“You bet! Only men's things ain't interestin' like women's. I wish men wore lace an' things, like they did when that picture was took.” She glanced up at an exquisite engraving of a scene at the Court of Louis XIV.

“I presume Mr. Bernard would rather wear the dress of 1869.”

“Yes. An' I 'd rather he would. His manners don't somehow fit what he 's got now. I never noticed that Bill was short on manners when he was wearin' a blue shirt, an' punchin' mules, or huntin' a lead. But in this fine house, him a pushing victuals with a silver knife, an' eatin' soup audible, while people sets round an' tries not to laugh; an' the flowers and the pictures someway shamin' him,—why, good feller as he is, I wish he 'd go back to his blue shirt an' mules, or else buy some manners. An' the worst of it is, I know I got just as bad a case of not fittin' here myself; only

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I'm that stuck on myself, I can't see it. I've—been going back right now on all my polish for a coon's age."

Esther ventured no reply, and the other woman began to put away her wardrobe. "Ain't it too bad maw had to die 'fore I got a chance to wear half these here new things? Black's so unbecoming! An' I can't even wear white ruches; them's for widders."

Esther was startled. No wonder conventional people could not understand Sally B. Esther knew that no more devoted daughter had ever lived than Sally B. had been; yet who, that knew nothing of this, would believe it in the face of her last remark?

"Bet she had a good time," the other went on. "We took her all over Yerrup; an' she lived two months after we come home. I bought her more clo'es than she'd had in all her life before; she could put on a different dress every day in the month! We took her riding lots in the victoria, took her to the theatre, the Cliff, an' everywhere! She did n't suffer none; I thank God for that." She went in and out of the closet once or twice without speaking, and Esther waited.

"Say!" Sally B. stopped in front of Esther, her arm piled high, gesticulating with her free hand. "She had the most expensive funeral that ever went out of St. Andrew's! More than a hundred carriages, all full, too. For all the poor folks I ever give to, I did it in maw's name. An' so I invited 'em all to her funeral. They come, too! An' it was the fust ride in a carriage some of 'em had ever had."

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Her sentences had been tossed by gusts of emotion; now speech was entirely wrecked. While she struggled for calmness Viola entered.

"Oh, Stella! Esther!" Viola's arms went round the other girl impulsively, and she burst into tears.

"What under the canopy are ye crying for?" her mother asked; yet she knew; and her own tears were hardly restrained.

"Oh, Ma, it's so good to see her! She belongs to the old, honest time when we said what we thought, or kept still."

The mother winced. Viola's unusual emotion disclosed unwelcome facts.

She was taller, and had blossomed into a soft, wood-violet sort of beauty that yet had something mystic about it; as rare as felicitous.

They spoke of many things, Viola's womanhood enfolding her in a mantle of sedateness. Esther knew she had been defrauded of her girlhood, and longed to set her free from her unyouthful self-control; wondered if she would, at the last test, sacrifice herself to her mother's ambition.

They went the round of the bedrooms, the kitchen, where Yic Wah greeted Esther with voluble cordiality; the stables, conservatories, and breeze-swept gardens; and Esther was preparing for the street when the maid brought a card.

"Mr. Bryan, Ma," Viola said. Her face grew gray and dull; while her mother's was swept by a quick panorama of doubt, question, mother love, ambition.

She put her arm about Viola's slender waist:

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"Honey, mammy expects a heap of you. Will you do it?"

Viola turned suddenly, spoke with strange impetuosity. "Don't, Ma! I can't do it! Freddy Bryan's honest. He'd ask me just the same if I was poor. I thought I would say yes, when I told him I'd give him my answer to-day. But I won't cheat him. I'll tell him I can't care for him as he deserves. It's no use, Ma." She put up a protesting hand, and even Sally B. was held to silence by the new sternness in her daughter. "Mr. Lawrence asked if he might come to see me on his return from Virginia City; said he'd have something to tell me then. If—if it's what you think, I'll marry him. I'll give as much as I'll get in that case." She drew herself up to unexpected dignity, kissed Esther, and left the room.

And Esther, distressed at the tragedy in the girl's face, made her adieus quickly, that Sally B. might not see the angry resentment in her heart.

CHAPTER IV

GIDEON'S STORY

And what is sorrow? 'T is a boundless sea.

And what is joy?

A little pearl in that deep ocean's bed.

I sought it, found it, held it o'er my head;

And to my soul's annoy,

It fell into the ocean's depth again.

And now I long and look for it in vain!

ALEXANDER PETÖFI.

ESTHER repeated the Magyar poet's words softly as she moved about her room. They fitted her mood. She had believed Alfred successfully rivalled. School, travel, society, had augmented the delusion. But when she met him at Judge Harmon's her defences quickly fell. She knew then that he had never been less than the best thing in her life. Immediately he sprang to his old lordship in her heart. Day and night he ruled, welcome in spite of sinister promises, yet opposed with persistence, with desperation.

Oh, why had she dropped the "little pearl"? Might there not have been another way? Would Gideon never relent? Where was he? She heard of him occasionally, always well mentioned, growing rich, yet unlocated, a wandering, silent soul.

Between the social gardens of Sacramento and San

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Francisco Amabel flitted, gathering the honeydew she fed upon. When Esther met her she was as gay with one cavalier as with another, until Alfred appeared. He was never her escort; yet if he came to party or theatre, she claimed him at once. Esther became convinced that the barrier that had once separated herself from Alfred now existed between him and Amabel; that for Amabel's own sake he insisted on her perfect freedom in the eyes of society. This conviction did not bring tranquillity; and Esther asked herself bitterly, why, in all the throng that followed her, there was not some brave and honest soul that could dislodge Alfred from her heart. As the winter waned she found herself very weary of the monotonous round, of the days and nights that loomed before her, stretching to blank, gray years. And when the warm sunshine adorned the hills with rioting bloom, more and more she spent solitary hours on the road with her smart team, her most conspicuous extravagance.

"Valentine's Day," she mused this morning, as she leaned out of the open window to the brilliant, close-bending sun of California. Fuchsia and nasturtium vied with perfumed heliotrope and jasmine in the long climb up the house-side; but purple and white won through their fragrance, and she gathered a feathery cluster for her belt.

In this mood she met her housekeeper in the dining room, and looked over the attractive heap brought by mail and messenger; valentines of the old lace paper sort, hiding tiny mirrors and ardent poetical requests to "look on my fair"; flowers, books, gems

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which she would never accept,—all the what-not of sentimental Valentine's Day forty years ago. One offering charmed her. It was a golden arrow of delicate Mexican filigree, light, graceful, wonderfully brilliant, a brilliance Esther did not at first discover as coming from many tiny diamonds, each hardly larger than a pin-point, set very close together.

"How exquisite!" exclaimed Mrs. Brockett, who was friend as well as housekeeper. "I never saw anything like it. For your hair, is n't it?" She took it from Esther and shot it through her big brown coil, the feathered end standing high, the pointed shaft shining just back of her ear. "It's the most beautiful ornament you have. Won't you keep it?"

"I see no way to return it," Esther said, searching wrappers and box for a clue to the sender. "There is n't a word, a letter,—not even the merchant's name on the box. How did it come?"

"The Chinaman said a small boy brought it this morning before seven o'clock," Mrs. Brockett replied, as she left the room.

The trinkets did not interest Esther. She took up her paper instead. At the first glance she cried out.

"Gideon Ingram Anthony,—His Romance!" were the first words she saw. She stared uncomprehendingly for a moment, then read on feverishly. It was a strange tale, pieced together from many sources, and confirmed by appended interviews with several "oldest settlers":

"The story of Gideon Ingram, of the well-known freighters, Ingram, Finn & Gould, reads like one of Mrs. South-

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worth's novels; yet it is only one of the many dramas resulting from the clash of Latin and Anglo-Saxon in California.

"In the early forties a young New England teacher, William Anthony by name, sea-voyaging for his health, dropped into Monterey out of curiosity, and remained, entranced by the climate and bewitched by a pair of beautiful Spanish eyes. Influential letters opened the best doors of the capital to him; and his own fine personality soon won him popularity. Lolita, the spoiled and only child of Señor Hernando Guerrero, heiress to half a county and the toast of the town, fell in love with the young Puritan, a love he returned as ardently as any swain of her own people. Those who know the Monterey of that day say that the blood of a prairie princess mingled with the blue Andalusian of the Guerreros in Lolita's veins. Whether true or not, she had the imperiousness of a dozen royal maidens; and over-riding all objections, she set a wedding day less than two months after the pair first met.

"Meantime the groom's brother, a lively young officer of a Boston merchantman, hove into port a week before the nuptials, with a budget of news and an appetite for diversion. With characteristic reserve the elder brother did not at once confide his secret, and thereof came the mischief. The young man was caught in the twinkling of two eyes—Lolita's eyes,—and by way of trading on the capital his brother had made, told her, in the poor Spanish he could command and in the scant English she could comprehend, the story of his life, home, and friends, a story that included a certain delicate maiden, his brother's betrothed, who embroidered interminably upon her trousseau and wept because her lover came not.

"The fiery beauty carried the situation with a high hand. More than one gallant Spanish dandy assisted Señor Guerrero in escorting William Anthony out of town. And from that

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hour the younger man was swept forward by an amorous enchantment so adroitly exercised, so imperious, that had his heart not acquiesced he could hardly have escaped standing at the altar in his brother's place and taking to wife the woman who was to have been his sister-in-law. The spell she wove was deep and lasting. He loved her, endured her hasty temper, forgave the love she still bore his brother (though she called it hate), and died a heart-broken man when, two years later, the birth of their child cost her life. The last written word of the young husband was a plea to his brother for forgiveness, and a request that Lolita's child, Gideon Ingram Anthony, might find a second father in his uncle.

"But William Anthony, melancholy, resentful, was wandering over the unpeopled wastes of Alta California, vainly seeking relief from a sore heart. And Gideon's grandfather, not trying very hard, it is suspected, failed to trace the baby's uncle. Letters from New England found him, however; told him that the faithful woman of his early love was slowly fading away. Conscience-stricken, he hastened back, married her, tried devotedly and with apparent success to nurse her to health, but buried her one year after their only child was born."

"Oh, my poor, poor mother!" Esther moaned. "No wonder you are so sad!" She drew the locket from beneath her dress and gazed a moment on the pictured face. Alfred's ring still hung on the chain, and she pressed it to her lips before hiding it again. "Like mother, like child!" she whispered scornfully. "Both foolish!" With a sigh she took up the paper and read on:

"Then came from Sutter's Fort the cry of 'Gold! gold!'

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that peopled California and swept away forever the dreamy, pastoral days of hidalgo, fandango, and league-long ranchos under Mexican rule. William Anthony came West with the first rush, found and claimed his nephew, mined, traded, and grew enormously wealthy; though he lived always in the wilds, visiting cities only as compelled.

"On the bleak side of a Washoe mountain he built a palace, the wonder of the decade; sent for his daughter, and reared the two children in an isolated luxury that was the source of many Aladdin-like tales. But failure came, removal, wandering; and the Anthonys were lost to the world that had known them. Later the father was killed by Indians; and the children, by this time man and woman grown, drifted, unknown and unknowing, into the heedless stream of humanity.

"The sequel proves that William Anthony never forgave his brother; for the boy grew up as a dependant, called only Gideon Ingram, and never knowing his right to his uncle's name. Señor Guerrero died some years ago, willing his estate to his grandson, and providing for a search for him. Yet it is probable he would have remained undiscovered had not the agents purchasing right of way for the Southern Pacific Railroad Company needed his signature. His identity was discovered some time ago, but his story is now for the first time made public."

Here followed the interviews.

"My cousin! Oh, he's my cousin!" Like an open book Esther read many things that had puzzled her,—her father's contradictions, his gloom, his reserves; Gideon, tender, cruel, constant, vengeful; a passion, a flame; conquering, yet ever defeated. Poor Gideon!

Esther dreamed over the strange tale till she was reminded of her team, waiting as she had ordered, and

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restless. "I'll drive at once," she said, and hastily prepared, eager for the out-of-doors, for motion.

She was taking up the reins when a card was brought her—Gideon's. She started back and would not touch it, till pencilled words caught her eye.

"Stella, I have wronged you; but if you have read the morning paper, you know how your father wronged me. Blood makes us cousins. I must see you a moment, must a little atone."

How could she see him? Yet she must. Childhood memories, the injustice he had suffered, his sorrows, all pleaded for him. Yet not in the narrow closeness of a room. It would be easier out in the open, away from her own house.

"Tell him I'm driving," she said to the maid. "Ask him to step to the front door."

Esther drove around the house to find him standing, bareheaded, on the gravelled road. He was haggard and thin, his shoulders stooped, his eyes gloomy. His clothes were handsome and well made; but they had a borrowed, misfitting look, that was pitiful to Esther. He did not speak, but stood waiting, slightly bent, only his sombre eyes pleading.

"Will you drive with me, Gideon?" she asked quietly.

Without a word he put on his hat, and stepped in beside her, tucking the robe carefully about her. Every movement had a gentle deprecation foreign to the Gideon she had known.

The team was restive, the streets crowded; and she could do no more than drive until a mile or

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more of hills had taken the first mettle out of her horses.

When they were on the road, following the shimmering bay shore around Fort Point to the sea, the plangent waves at their feet, the salt air blowing clean upon them, the vast farness of blue ocean sweeping away petty thoughts, bringing eternal verities,—there Gideon and Esther found a common meeting ground.

Gideon freed her from her promise, and would have explained, but she objected. "It's past, Gideon. Alfred is safe, well. Let me forget what I know, hear no more." Her heart bounded, yet was leaden again. Freedom had come too late. Alfred no longer loved her.

"Yes, one thing I would know. Did Phineas Cadwallader have anything to do with Alfred's—capture?"

"No."

"What makes him hate Alfred, then?"

"He hates him on more than one score. Vincent knows some important secret of his, and Vincent has also caught Cad in one or two tricks against the Company. Cad's afraid he'll be reported. Besides all this, Cad was the last man seen with Vincent before he disappeared; and if the case is ever investigated, Cad'll have hard work to clear himself."

"Were you—? Did any one find out—? Why were you not arrested?"

"There was not a scrap of evidence against me. My alibi was perfect."

Esther was long silent. Gideon looked out to sea, and waited.

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"Have you told any one?" she asked finally. "You — you had the thing done, if you did n't do it yourself, did n't you?"

"Yes. And I — I've told no one — must not."

"Must not?" she questioned wonderingly. She knew he did not lack the courage.

"Drag you into such a foul complication, — the trial, your heart's secrets exposed, prison! To be sure, I did n't think of that three years ago. Now you are my cousin — my name yours —"

"But justice," she began, as he halted. "Ought respect for a name to stand in the way of that?"

"I've thought of that. But Vincent is free, as well in health as ever; no trouble or disgrace attaches; and he's better off in pocket than if he had not suffered from me, for I've been able to throw a thing or two his way. There are the lost years, and — and you. Do you think at this late day it would please him if I dragged your name before the public? Would n't that rather distress him?"

"On account of his own name, perhaps; he cares nothing for mine." She was thinking of Amabel's face as she had waltzed by her the night before, looking into Alfred's eyes.

"Of course! I knew that always," Gideon said dully, and gazed seaward.

On the veranda of the old Cliff House they stopped as does the tourist of to-day, to watch the endless flip-flop of wet, glistening seals clambering the gray rocks only to drop into the sea again. The same brilliant, limitless panorama unfolded westward then

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as to-day,—beetling cliffs, the sapphire sky, white, fantastic clouds, twin green promontories guarding the Golden Gate, the misty, enchanted Farallones, the eternal roar of the surf. But nature then was all un-subdued. Save the Cliff House, a frail white parasite clinging to the wave-lashed rocks, the place was unblemished by man's ugly impertinences. No "fakers" no shacks, no flimsy, bannered pavilions, no gathering places for noisy, profaning crowds. Except the same old muddy road that to-day leads down the hill from the new Cliff House, nothing marred the solemn solitude.

They lingered a little, both silent, Gideon nearer content than for years.

"Where have you been this long, long time, Gideon?" Esther asked on their way back to the city.

"Many places. Twice I went to Poughkeepsie. I saw you, though you did n't know it; saw that you were well and happy."

"Gideon!" Esther exclaimed, astonished.

"I've gridironed Nevada and Utah deserts looking for gold, and for wagon routes; and have found both. The last few months I've spent between San Francisco and the ranch. I've seen you often, Stella." He looked at her wistfully.

"Seen me?"

"Yes, in theatres, on the street, wherever society notes in the papers gave me a clue to your goings."

"And you never came— never spoke—"

"No. I knew you could not marry Vincent. He loves Charley Crocker's niece. As long as I was silent

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it—it seemed— I love you, Star, just the same; no, a thousand times more!” he went on despondently, using unconsciously the old familiar name. “But you need not fear me. I shall never trouble you after this. We’re—we’re cousins, yes, more like brother and sister; and I’m unfit—” His sentence went unfinished.

Instantly Esther remembered the Spanish woman’s hate that yet was love.

They were nearing Esther’s home. “What are your plans, Gideon?”

“To see the finish of the railroad, then sell out my holdings and go to my ranch.”

“But, Gideon, you won’t like that dull life!”

“Like? Life?” he repeated gloomily. “I shall do no harm there. That is all.”

Utter hopelessness was in voice and face. Yet Esther could think of no adequate word, and drove on in silence till they stopped at the doorway.

“Will you come in?”

“No, Stella. I shall not annoy you further. This is farewell.”

She looked into his sad face and saw two generations of tragedy there. Resentment, aversion died. “Oh, Gideon, you are of my blood, the only one, my almost brother. Whatever you have done, will do, is mine to bear by right of kinship. Don’t think I shall reproach you. Come to see me! I will be good to you.”

His face lifted for a flashing instant, his eyes softened with glad tears. But the transformation passed almost

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as it came. "No, no, Stella!, Thank you for those dear words. But it— I have only to atone. It's impossible! Good-bye."

He started hurriedly down the walk, but halted, turned back. "I saved Vincent's life once, here in the city. Never speak of it. I've only told you because— because I want you to know— I'm trying to even up the game."

He wheeled and went swiftly through the gate.

CHAPTER V

THE CONQUEST OF THE HEART OF SALLY B.

FORTY years ago, daring surgeons did not so often undertake to better nature's work, make joints where none had been, remake organs that had not fulfilled their functions.

Alvin Carter, despite his cheerfulness, had ever silently rebelled against his crutch. And when the idea was born to him that he might have his leg broken and made straight, he never halted till he found a surgeon willing to add his skill to Alvin's money and pluck.

Three years with scarcely a day's vacation had won for him promotion and the confidence of officers as well as of fellow employees. Thus Alvin had the great eye and sympathy of the Governor himself behind his brave venture into unfamiliar realms of surgery. When Alvin came through with two straight legs, the trifling shortness of one being corrected by a high heel, he gladly accepted the diversion of a trip to the Front while he was learning to walk on two feet.

Fresh from those exciting scenes, he presented himself at Sally B.'s home. Not for one moment had he faltered in his determination to win Viola, if she remained true; and he never doubted her. Yet now, sitting in the most beautiful room he had ever seen, perturbed by the obsequious butler's ill concealed

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disdain when he had to send up his name instead of the requested card,—all in an instant Viola grew remote, his aspiration to her preposterous. The modest cottage he had thought out—the plans were in his pocket waiting her approval—seemed but a miserable hut beside this magnificent palace.

Time for his heart to congeal had been ample when Sally B. swept into the room, paused a chilling instant, and came forward with her most imposing society manner.

“Why, Mr. Carter! This is elegant to see you! Elegant weather, is n’t it? When did you come to the Bay? Elegant time of year to visit at the Bay, now, ain’t it?”

With an astonishing swing of her sable draperies she seated herself back to the light, her face dimly outlined, while the late afternoon sun shone full upon him. She had called him by his surname, had not offered to shake hands as he rose to meet her, nor to take his hat as of old. He felt unwelcome. He had expected that, yet not in this bewildering way. He fumbled awkwardly with his hat, dropped his gloves; and as he stooped to recover them, the sun cruelly exhibited his perspiring embarrassment to the shadow-hidden eyes in front of him.

“I read of the crack operation the doctors performed on you, Mr. Carter. I congratulate you on its bein’ O.K. It’s an elegant improvement. Won’t you set—sit?”

She did not even look at him, he thought. Blindly he groped for a chair, his eyes burning as if she had

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slapped them with a hard hand. Had he but known, Sally B.'s keen vision had instantly noted and approved his erect manliness, his resolute countenance. Her heart warmed to him. He belonged to her world, appreciated her. Yet ambition held the rein. She suspected his errand, and purposely put him at a disadvantage, plying him with questions, intending to leave him no opportunity for personal topics. But for once she met her equal. She took the one topic that could best fire him; and in turn he caught her spirit in the flame of his enthusiasm, and consumed her society veil in a single sentence.

"Do tell me something about the railroad. I miss it powerful—ly."

"I've just returned from the Front; got back yesterday."

"Oh, go—" She hesitated. He could see her eyes shine, knew she was going to say "gosh!" and his self-possession flew home again.

In a breath Sally B. caught herself, and went on.

"I'm just that hungry to hear all about things. Where'd they run the line? Across by Battle Mountain—I know that; and where else?"

"They run a hundred lines, I guess; just kept the surveyors sticking pins into the whole American Desert till they'd picked out the best one. They've got the track away by Battle Mountain now; past Be-o-wa-we, Argenta,—that's the junction for Austin and Reese River,—oh, they were way by Toano when I left."

"I know them places; come acrost there in '54. Paw emigrated from Oregon to Salt Lake, did n't like

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it there, an' come over to Californy—California." She had almost forgotten her elegance.

Alvin breathed freely. "My! But it's cold over there!"

"I bet it is," she endorsed, emphatically. "How's Charley Crocker, an' Gregory, an' all the rest? Lord! I can smell the sage-brush now!"

"Working like blazes! Laying track by moonlight and stars! Just think of that! And big sage-brush bonfires to help out. It was the strangest sight; the men looked like goblins, and the hammer-blows sounded far away, and made you creep."

"Gosh! They must be runnin' them U. P. folks hard."

"Not so hard as I'd like to see. The U. P.'s are coming like lightning, just a-whoopin' 'em up! They have a man for every rod for a hundred miles. They've got good fuel and plenty of stuff. Glory! I wish our folks could hurry up some of those thirty-five iron-ships out on the ocean, and scare up more men. That lot of rails the Washoe took up won't last any time."

"Say! That was a snifty trick, the way they snooped them five hundred Chinamen straight from the ship to the train an' got 'em to the Front before they knew where they was goin'. I read about it in the paper." She moved her chair a little and the light reached her face; Alvin saw the old spirit looking out of it.

"It's awful, what our folks have to buck against. They can't build shops for lack of men and stuff—stuff that's coming in those iron-ships. And there's freeze-ups, slides, and wrecks,—nothing settled and

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finished,—and the immense cost of repairs, when they've nothing fixed right to make 'em. Why, a waterspout over on the desert sliced out a mile and a half of track as clean as a piece of cheese! And then—the papers, and San Francisco!”

“The Lord pizen them ‘Clarion’ men! I wish ’t He would! There!”

“So do I!” Alvin assented heartily.

“And Goat Island—what do you think?” •

“Think? Mad! The measure would have passed Congress O.K. if San Francisco capital had n’t fixed the lobby. You bet San Francisco ’ll be sorry some day. Why, there’s a catchin’ epidemic of railroad building all over the State, and the C. P. holds the key to it all. The State of California better treat those people well, or she ’ll get her come-uppin’s.”

“By goll! If I was them four at Sacramento I’d cinch her so tight it’d cut her in the ribs!”

Alvin grinned. “The time ’ll come when San Francisco would rather have tracks and depots on Goat Island than give up two or three miles of her narrow little back yard.”

“Why, Al, what do you mean?”

“The San Francisco papers say a strip of land thirty feet wide, enough for two tracks, is all the Company ’ll need for thirty years! And—”

“Consarn ’em!” she interjected. “But how can the Company get more? Them senators up in Sacramento squashed the bill to make San Francisco sell or give right of way up to four or five hundred acres, for tracks an’ depots an’ things.”

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"What do you suppose Alfred Vincent's up to? If you needed a block in the city right bad, and everybody knew it, how would you begin? Holler right out?"

Sally B.'s answering smile held a world of craft. "On the sly, of course. An' I reckon Leland Stanford's smart as I be." She drew a deep breath of satisfaction. "By jinks! It's plumb good to talk railroad once more. Bill don't keer for it, but I do. I'd ruther live—" She changed the topic abruptly. "Is Billy Dodge over there anywhere?"

"He's conductor on the Humboldt division; makes a bully one, too!"

"I bet he does. He—"

Alvin squared about in his chair and interrupted her. "Mrs. Bernard,"—it was her turn to wince at her surname,— "I've come for Viola. Will you let me have her peaceably, or must I make a row about it?" He was quite himself; and Sally B. knew very well that no glamour of luxury or shadow of Vanity Fair could frighten him now. Yet she had one bomb left.

"She won't have you, Al. I'm sorry, but—"

"No, you ain't sorry; and that is n't the truth, anyway. It's you that won't have me; and Vi'll break her heart to please you." He rose and stood before her in quiet dignity.

Sally B. flinched at the stinging words. For a moment she was silent, then stood beside him, her hand on his arm, her voice full of pleading. "See here, Al! Vi's done without you a long time. She's taken the edi—education we've give her like a

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thoroughbred. And she's beautiful—you hain't seen Vi lately; you don't know how handsome she is."

"Yes, I do!" he returned quickly. "I've read every scrap of the lots the papers have said of her. I've sent to the galleries for her pictures; and that one the 'Call' spoke of, makes her a little princess."

"Every bit, an' better!" The mother's pride shone in her eyes. "Now, Al, we've give Vi culture; an' she's took to culture like a salmon to fresh water in spawnin' time. She's got the style for culture, an' the tin to set it off. An' these big bugs round here that's long on culture, too, they see it in Vi, an' take her right into their set. There's Freddy Bryan—you know who he is?"

Alvin nodded.

"Well, he's stuck on her, bad. An' there's that English lord, Lawrence; I don't know but he's her fyansee by now; he was here this afternoon. Maybe he ain't gone yet."

Alvin looked down at the floor and said nothing, though she waited for him to speak.

"Think of havin' an English lord for a son-in-law! Or at any rate, Freddy Bryan!"

"But what sort of a figure would you and Bill Bernard cut with that kind of people?" he asked, in sudden scorn.

"We ain't that pattern of fool. We'd keep away," she returned intrepidly.

"And Vi? I suppose she'd never want to see her father and mother. She'd be quite happy without them." He turned contemptuous eyes upon Sally

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B.'s quivering face. "Lord! She ought to be happy without you! It's worse than Abraham's sacrifice if there had been no lamb! At least, Isaac would have burned quickly!"

He saw Sally B.'s face drop and gray shadows creep in. It did not occur to him till afterward how strange it was for him to stand there and score Sally B. of the slashing tongue and hot temper; stranger that she should stand meekly still and let him do it.

At last she found speech, and her words were steady.

"What's the use of money and beauty, an' Vi's aristocratic way, if Bill an' me was ready to tie her down to our kind? To life on the desert; maybe—Bill ain't no finandseer—to tough luck an' pore grub. That's what's bound to come if Bill's luck turns. Do you think that's lovin' her? That lord b'longs to folks that's always had money, an' always looked it. An' if he fails, there's Freddy Bryan; he's a man, the right kind. If he loses his money, he'll make it again,—he's buckin' bright,—an' she'll live genteel. I s'pose you'd call it lovin' her to drag her away from all that, an' tie her up to a little four by six life with you, a-trampin' along the railroad!" It was her turn for scorn, and it burned deep.

Alvin walked abruptly away to the open window. The beautiful palm garden with its waxen-crested calla hedge and vine-wrapped trellises was full of winter bloom and fragrance; but he saw nothing. His eyes were misty. He was looking into a dun future without Viola, a future never before contemplated. For, with boyish optimism, he had felt himself, since his

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legs were made straight, and his house ready to be built, as worthy of her as any man. But the exotic life he had glimpsed, the contrast between himself and a foreign nobleman, or rich and travelled Frederick Bryan, whose opulent life the papers were ever ready to exploit, Sally B.'s biting challenge,—these in a second razed his years-old castle of hope. His jaw set, and he drove his fingers deep into his palms.

Sally B., watching, saw her battle won; and a quick revulsion of feeling set in. She admired his square, manly shoulders. Freddy Bryan was thin, and stooped a little, and the lord was small for an Englishman. Alvin's plain, well-fitting business suit had a wholesome, honest look that appealed to her. She remembered how valiantly he had fought his way on a crutch through half-starved boyhood to manhood, honorable manhood. Even his straightness touched a new chord,—she was proud of the courage that had pioneered an operation that was the talk of the papers. And he had done it for Vi!

Alvin felt her changed attitude, and when he came back to her and spoke, his voice was very gentle. "May I see Viola before I go? It'll be my last chance, you know."

"Oh, Al!" she cried out, and stopped.

Alvin was astonished at her emotion, yet waited.

Almost, ambition had lost; not quite. "Al, boy! Do you think you'd better? Won't it be harder for you? An' for her, too?" she added after a breath.

Alvin's face contracted. Give her up without one more look into her dear face? Not see for himself

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that it was well with her? That she could love—at least, be content with—the man her mother would secure for her? His heart beat clamorously; and he told himself he would see her, *would* see her!

Yet he took up his hat, looked calmly for his gloves, and turned steady eyes to where Sally B. stood, her white-knuckled hands grasping a chair-back desperately.

“Tell Vi—tell Vi—no, don’t tell her anything!” he said, with forced calmness. “Good-bye, Sally B.” He bowed slightly and walked out of the door.

“Oh, Al Carter, you’re the best man I ever—” She caught her breath and stopped, staring after him.

Neither to the right nor to the left did he turn his eyes as he walked down the winding, rose-lined avenue to the iron gates. Somewhere in the great house a piano was sounding. The melody was soft and plaintive. “Good-bye, good-bye,” it moaned over and over again. And the iron gates clashed to behind him, shutting out his paradise!

Down the parked sidewalk with bent head he lagged slowly, where so shortly before he had blithely hastened. Life seemed at an end!

“Al! Al Carter!” screamed a shrill voice behind him. Through the gates Sally B. flew, her hair disordered, her full draperies bellying to the wind like pirate sails, her crape ruffles dragging out behind her. “Al, come back!” she cried breathlessly, catching him by the arm, hurrying him through the iron gates again, through the rose-lined avenue to the house. “Come back an’ see Vi! Gosh darn it, Al! I throw

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up the game! What does a shamming old Greaser like me want of a big bug for a son-in-law? You 're good enough, right smart better 'n I deserve; an' good enough for Vi, too. Go 'long in the music-room there, an' find Vi. Tell her if she's said 'Yes' to Reg Lawrence, or to Freddy Bryan, or to any other feller, I 'll say 'No' to him! Go!"

She dragged him into the hall, pushed him toward the music-room; and, sobbing wildly, ran up the soundless stairs.

Alvin stood still, dazed, half conscious of ripping, tearing ruffles on the stair, when a little figure sprang forward to meet him.

"Oh, Alvin!" she cried in quick rapture, then halted questioningly.

"Viola, your mother has accepted me for you," he said softly, and took her in his arms. And long years of misery were cut from the lovers' calendar.

CHAPTER VI

THE BATTLE ON THE DESERT

OUT in the sage-covered wilds a horde of pygmies charged the ice-bound earth with pick and powder. Fighting desperately against endless malignant obstacles, George Gregory forged on toward Salt Lake, the goal of his dreams.

In this day of perfected transportation, with the civilized earth conquered and bound by innumerable cords of steel and wire, where the base of supplies is not so very far from the place of consumption, few can realize the problem before those intrepid men, who, with little money and large hostility behind them, hauled their strenuously obtained subsistence and material over nearly a thousand miles of poorly equipped road. They fought mountains of snow as they had never before been fought. They forced their weak, wheezy little engines up tremendous grades with green wood that must sometimes be coaxed with sage-brush gathered by the firemen running alongside of their creeping or stalled iron horses. There were no steel rails. Engineers worked unhelped by the example of perfected railroad building of later times. No tracks or charts of the man-killing desert! No modern helps, no ready, ever eager capital seeking their enterprise! Only scepticism, hatred from their enemies, and "You can't do it!" flung at them from friend and foe.

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Side by side, mile after mile, the rival companies ran their grades, the Central Pacific working steadily east, the Union Pacific rushing west from their main front, and pushing east with the grade they had begun at Humboldt Wells. They hoped to outrun their rivals and meet their own iron far west of Salt Lake.

The hundred and seventy miles of grading from Wells to Ogden had been let by both companies in small contracts to Mormons. And they had taken up their work in true Mormon fashion. Mother, or mothers, children, the cow, the calf, the chicken coop and haystack, all accompanied the father, and squatted by the grade each week; and each week moved on again.

Thus the days sped. Gregory's life became a profane prayer for iron. For ten days his men worked but four hours a day. The rest of the time they slept, visited, or tramped. A few quarrelled, some gambled on the sly. Yet these men averaged well, and it was not for them Gregory held his sleepless vigilance, but for the tide of riff-raff setting westward from the on-coming Union Pacific, from the remote mines and camps, and taking toll of mischief as it passed.

One night, worn with fruitless courtship of sleep, Gregory rose and went out into the desert cold, striding noiselessly down the sleeping tented town. A city-tuned ear would have been oppressed by the stillness, but Gregory's trained sense caught many sounds,—the horses feeding quietly; the crackle of sage-brush

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as some tethered animal pulled against his halter for a softer spot; a slyer, intermittent rustle, the creeping night-life of the barrens stealing upon refuse piles for easy suppers; the distant howl of the coyote; snores of sleeping men; even the footfall of the watchman at the farther end of his long beat. Gregory turned the other way, passed the boarding train, the commissary, the shops, and on by the Chinese camps. Returning, a slight noise caught his ear as he neared the wheeled bakery. He stopped, listened, and sent his lantern ray against the door. It was ajar.

Presently a man came out with a loaf of bread and climbed down the steps into Gregory's light. He was a recent comer, thick, sturdy, with beetling brows and fierce, resentful eyes.

"What are you doing here?" thundered Gregory.

"I walked too far to get back for supper, and went for some bread," the man answered readily enough.

"How'd you open the door? Was n't it locked?"

"Yes, sir; but I got the key. I—"

He got no farther. Gregory dropped his lantern and flew at him. Hot anger and the power of authority reinforced Gregory's more than usual strength. He rained blows and invective on the offender; fisted him and booted him; kicked him under the wagon finally, with a last irate charge.

"Lie there, you dog! till daylight, if you want to; but be out of this camp before I see you again, you son of iniquity! Blast your eyes! I'll see if stealing can't be stopped here!"

Gregory hurried away, but not fast enough to

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escape the man's defiant rejoinder: "Taking a loaf of bread in place of supper's no stealing. I'll be even with you for this, you damned slave-driver!"

The voice was weak, but Gregory felt the venom, and its threat.

"There's a man under the bakery that I've ordered out of camp," he said to the watchman, as the two met. "See that he goes; but give him this—on the quiet, you understand." The watchman took the five dollars. "He's only worked two days; there won't be much coming to him, poor devil," the Superintendent said compassionately. It was this side of Gregory's varied character that won for him the allegiance and service of the men he drove hard, though less hard than he drove himself.

Not content with previous malevolence, destiny dealt Gregory another telling blow. A virulent small-pox epidemic broke forth and swept the camps. Gregory tore about, ordering, quarantining, fumigating, stamping out the scourge with relentless vigor; yet never halting his daily moving camp, never resting shovel or hammer as long as there was a foot of rail to lay.

Governor Stanford established headquarters at Salt Lake City, and Superintendent Crocker flitted up and down the line to the Front whenever the Sacramento office did not claim him.

The movements of the directors seemed fatally slow to Gregory, the man of steel, who must ask no questions but execute their office-made plans. He chafed more than ever over delay in forwarding materials, for

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he was desperately near the end of all the rails on the Coast.

"Why don't you get iron out across the Isthmus?" he asked of Mr. Crocker when the latter had told of the delayed ships carrying iron, locomotives, and other supplies.

"What?" the Superintendent cried in dismay. "Pack iron across the Isthmus? Preposterous! The directors would never consent. Hopkins—he'd go crazy! We—"

"Good heavens, Mr. Crocker! Don't let him—let them hold us up now!"

"But, Gregory, the expense would be terrific! And what will the papers say? As it is, they claim we're criminally extravagant; even say I'm building my house out of high tariff and money obtained under false pretences." Mr. Crocker smiled grimly.

"Oh, to hell with the papers! Give 'em something worth talking about!"

"But, Gregory, we're planting money under every foot of track, finished and unfinished. Think of the things that need to be done, rebuilt, mended. And last week we killed twenty Chinamen. We'll have—"

"Dead Chinamen need n't bother us; it's live ones we want."

"Yes; but the dead ones make it hard for us to get more live ones. And they fear the cold, too. They say, 'Too muchee snow! Too muchee kill!' And you're always howling for more Chinese, you know."

"Yes, sir. Never have enough. Can't you do that slick trick again, Mr. Crocker? Catch another

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shipload on the fly and yank them over here before they have time to find out whether it's hell-hot or heaven-cold here? And white men, too. Great guns! Men! Men! Anything that can drive a spike!"

"But what do you want of men if your iron's nearly out?"

"You'll get me iron across the Isthmus."

"We can't! It'll cost —"

"Jove and all the little gods! What does money, piles of it at any interest, if you have n't got it on hand, count for against more than a hundred and fifty miles of road for all time?"

"A hundred and fifty miles? What do you mean?"

"It's that far from here to Ogden. The U. P. people get every mile they can clap iron on first. Yet their iron's away east of Ogden; and I can beat 'em there, if you'll only get me the iron! Think what the business of Salt Lake Valley will amount to in ten, thirty, fifty years! You've simply got to have that piece of road!"

"You can't do it, Gregory!"

"By the eternal, I can! I've set my pins for it ever since that blamed spy hornswoggled me last Summer. The minute the engineers cut out the Palisade tunnel I knew I was O.K. Now, don't play Pharaoh on me, Mr. Crocker! I can't build your road without iron. Get it for me, if you have to steal a foundry and preëmt the Isthmus of Panama!"

"It can't be done in time."

"It can, sir! Telegraph the Governor at Salt Lake. He'll telegraph the order, rush the foundries, a dozen

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of 'em! By jiminy! You can put the iron afloat in a week, have it here in forty days!"

Mr. Crocker caught fire. "By George, Gregory! I believe we might do it. I'll have a talk over the wire with the Governor." He was about to turn away, but stopped to give Gregory a paper. "There's Tuesday's 'Clarion.' Interesting reading there. They're begging the Union Pacific to fly by us, come into California by Beckworth Pass, and snatch our trade."

"Let the 'Clarion' blow. We're giving the U. P. about all the knitting work they can 'tend to, we and those dried-beef-colored Sioux."

"Hold on, Gregory! We'll be charged with murder, yet," laughed the other. "There's the train!" he added, as a whistle pierced the still air.

The men walked along the newly laid track, past the construction train to the rear, and awaited the approaching iron train.

"Only five cars!" groaned Gregory. "It won't keep the spikers going any time."

"Who's that woman standing in the car door? Well, if it is n't Sally B.!" Mr. Crocker exclaimed, and went forward.

There she stood, smiling, alert, her mourning discarded, her travelling suit the smartest, her strong personality raying out hypnotically to all within reach. The moment the train halted she tripped down the steep steps, and went quickly toward the two men, calling out voluble greetings on the way. First Mr. Crocker, then Mr. Gregory, she embraced

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with impartial cordiality, and kissed each audibly on the cheek.

"It's the same old Sally B. Time can't touch her, youth can never forget her," Mr. Crocker said gallantly.

"Thank ye, Mr. Crocker; but it's me that's got to do the blarneying. I've come begging," she said bluntly, yet with her old, confident smile.

"Whatever I can do for you—" Mr. Crocker began heartily, when Gregory interrupted.

"I'll leave you to your business now, Sally B.,—excuse me, Mr. Crocker,—but as soon as you've finished, you go right forward to our car,—first on the other side of the construction engine there. The madame'll hail you as an angel in the desert. We—"

"But I'm goin' right back to-day."

"No you won't! You'll stay all night with us and cheer up the madame. Plenty of room." He lifted his hat with a grace that revealed somewhat of the secret of his ability to meet all situations.

That night Sally B. told her story to the sympathetic Gregorys. The human units that swung Gregory's hammers and cowered under his fierce energy little dreamed of his gentler side, of the man who cherished and comforted a delicate, sensitive wife still mourning the death of their only child.

"Yes, Bill's broke all to pieces; won't never be no 'count again, the doctor says. That last buck of his'n against the Stock Board tuck his pile, an' him, too, mighty nigh." Sally B.'s acquired culture dropped from her like a loosely pinned mantle. The desert, the bustle, the railroad, even rudeness and crudity,

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appealed to her elemental nature. Every fibre of her being responded to the life about her. She bounded to its call as the long tethered cavalry horse to "boots and saddles!"

"And all your money gone? How can you take care of him? It's too bad! Too bad!" condoled Mrs. Gregory.

"Too bad nothing! I'm glad—about the money, I mean. This is the first good clean breath I've had in three year. If Bill was O.K., I could yell with joy for gittin' away from money, an' style, an' big bugs. Vi's fixed. Yes, goin' to marry Al Carter next week. His house's all ready—bang up, it is, too. He's on top; good's salt-risin' bread, an' straight as an Injun now!" It would have pleased Alvin's mother to have seen the proud flash in Sally B.'s eye. "And I'm comin' out here to work for—for Bill." Her voice trembled.

"What did the Boss give you?" Gregory asked a little later.

"Toano eatin' house."

"Good enough! There's a chump there now that don't know beefsteak from a mule's hoof. I'm glad he's got to go. It's a good stand. You can hook trade from the U. P. outfit there, too."

"You bet I will! I'm just dead gone on Charley Crocker. He's been that good to me! I'm goin' to live now, you bet! I'm goin' to keep the doggondest best eatin' house this side the Bay. An' I'm goin' to carry Bill on a feather piller's long's he lives. Pore Bill! Lordy! But I'm tired!" She finished

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breathlessly, and collapsed in tears,— tears that frightened George Gregory, who had not supposed that Sally B. possessed them.

But Nellie Gregory understood. And in the little boxed-off room in the middle of the car, the two women mingled their griefs and comforted each other.

CHAPTER VII

THE MESSAGE OF THE DANCING GIRL TO ESTHER

TO Esther, restless, unoccupied, came Sally B.'s urgent invitation to visit her at Toano. Esther accepted it at once, deciding not to wait for the Harmons. Business had delayed the Judge, and now fear of small-pox for his wife. A pitted face testified his own immunity. But Esther had no fear of the disease; Toano was free from the scourge; and the breath of the wide, free desert breezing from Sally B.'s letter roused the wings of Esther's spirit.

Alfred's image still persisted; in those rough scenes she might dislodge him from her life. His service required him to be so constantly moving that Esther could not fix him in any locality. He was tantalizingly afloat in the atmosphere of "perhaps." To-day, perhaps, he might be in the city, might be at the theatre, perhaps at the Harmons'; to-morrow, perhaps, he might be hurrying to the Front, for all things seemed converging there. This uncertainty increased his hold upon her. Deep in her heart was the hope she denied voice, that out in the open somewhere she should meet him, speak with him, from his eyes divine the truth concerning Amabel.

She timed her going to catch Uncle Billy's train out from Winnemucca. Through all the years she had written him at intervals, sending her letters at first

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through Sally B. Even to Uncle Billy she could not disclose herself during those earlier months of struggle and fear for Alfred's safety. Since her return to San Francisco it had been impossible for him to visit her, though invitation had not been lacking.

She wished to surprise him. He was therefore quite unprepared for the tall, elegant young woman who waited impatiently at the rear end of the car to greet him. She saw him glance toward her as soon as he entered, and her heart leaped. But he came calmly on, from passenger to passenger, stopping here and there for question or direction. He looked her way inquiringly once or twice, but blankly. She was chilled. She forgot that her mask had become habitual, forgot her slenderness, all that her varied life had written into her face. Other eyes as well as Uncle Billy's had been baffled. A wave of disappointment swept over her, and her face settled to greater unlikeness to the girl of the past. He came steadily down the car. She could not guess that he was wondering who the lady in the rear seat might be. Nor could she surmise that he classified her as belonging to the "smart set," to a feminine caste as far removed from his understanding, he thought, as the angels.

When he was yet a few seats away, recognition came. He sprang to her, his face transfigured. Thought of stranger eyes, of official dignity, fled. He caught her hands in his own. "Honey! Stella!" he cried softly as he kissed her on the cheek, the years' hunger for her shining in his misty eyes. "Where undeh the canopy did you come from, honey?"

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She smiled her joy, but said no word.

He still held her hands, her rings cutting under the pressure neither marked till later, his eyes searching her glowing face. Her mask had dropped; her soul was open to him.

"Heavens! How beautiful you are!" he exclaimed ardently; yet the words were impersonal, as if he had suddenly come upon some fine statue, or lovely portrait. "But you are the same Stella—the same dear Stella, I can see. Thank God for that! I was afraid fortune and flattery might spoil my little girl."

He made her as comfortable as possible in the rough car that did duty as sleeper, coach, parlor, and emigrant car, all in one. When the meagre business after leaving each infrequent station was despatched he came to her again; and the long day was not half time enough for the tale of Esther's eventful life, every detail questioned and appreciated by her rapt listener.

Esther opened her eyes the next morning upon a strange life, new, yet old. The Wizard Desert wrapped her again with the mantle of his enchantment. As of old, the hills walked out of their spaces to meet her. The unworldly air caressed her cheek with a spirit touch. Forsaken of color, yet with an allurement all its own, the gray landscape stretched endlessly. But the skies above, atoning, leaned down in a gorgeous, ever-changing riot of color; while the far, dim mountains advanced and retreated with the day, breathing through the tender violet haze whispers of the Infinite.

Esther was back in her own world, back to Sally B.'s loving arms, to Uncle Billy's tender solicitude.

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She asked no questions of the magician, did not try to rend the magic veil; did not know that the rude town, behind its picturesque face, might carry poisoned fangs. Here was life! Here was work! Here lived men with deeds to do, courage to dare.

"Are you happy, Mrs. Sally?" Esther asked, following her from one to another of the rough rooms, as the mistress deftly touched each chaotic spot to order.

"Lord love ye, child! I did n't know how powerful pestered I was there in Oakland an' the city, till I got back here where I b'long. There's folks of course that's made for totin' society's pack; some of 'em's soft, squashy critters, an' some of 'em's plumb good like Freddy Bryan; but the plains, an' work, an' men with blood in 'em, an' freedom,—that's what I was born to; an' it's what I'm fit fur." She was tearing an unspeakable bed to pieces with merciless scrutiny. "Gosh! The way a man runs a hotel without no woman is 'nough to make a skunk sick!"

Esther marvelled at Sally B.'s reversion. Nothing of her violent effort at culture remained; and her old speech and manner seemed doubly vigorous for the long rest.

"If only Bill was— was right peart agin—" Sally B. began, but stopped abruptly, and shook a pillow dangerously near to its undoing.

"Did you hear about Blowhard Cad?" she asked a little later.

"I overheard his name in the car yesterday, but learned nothing definite."

"He's arrested for stealing from the Company."

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"Oh, surely not for stealing!" Instantly Esther's mind flew back to the desert station, the overland journey, the scene on the hillside, to many lesser visions of him, even to her last meeting at Judge Harmon's. Always the same aversion to him, the same wonder that the Company trusted him.

"Yes, stealin'. They give him a passenger out of Sacramento, an' he did n't run it three weeks till they caught him. The boys say there's something back of that, too, an' it'll go hard with him. Pore devil! He was bright 'nough fur meanness; pity he could n't a' tried bein' white. Come on. I got to go to the kitchen."

Here again reigned Yic Wah, the imperturbable.

"Do you like it here?" Esther asked him.

He grinned. "You bettee! Heap good. One dollah man out here; no two bittee man. Heap plenty loom. You likee say 'damn,' all light. No matter."

"Yic got converted down in Oakland," Sally B. said when out of his hearing. "It'll give ye a crick in yer side to hear him singin' 'sams. He's the best hollerer Charley Crocker's got. McLane's comin' through to-night. The boys has stuffed Yic with a lot about Mac, told him Mac's goin' to do up Crocker's railroad; and I'm powerful 'fraid Yic'll sass Mac." There was a trifle of worry in Sally B.'s laugh.

"How can he hinder our Company now?"

"He cain't hinder 'em, but he kin pester 'em a heap, him an' the gang he's actin' fur. He ain't any wuss 'n

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the rest, only smarter. He's on his way home from Washington and New York now. Been tryin' to fix Congress agin, I'll lay. But I bet Collis P. beats him! I bet on Collis P. every time. Read this." She tumbled over a pile of papers, found a recent copy of the "Clarion," and pointed out a short telegraphic despatch. "Read it aloud, honey. I like to listen when our fellers spouts at the Government powwow."

It was an appeal from Mr. Huntington to Andrew Johnson, as the head of the outgoing administration, on behalf of the Central Pacific Railroad. "We earnestly protest against any delay which will postpone our rights to another administration. The Pacific Railroad is one of the great enterprises belonging to your administration. It is nearly completed. The Secretaries now in office are acquainted with the facts in detail. They have an amount of knowledge and experience on them which those who succeed them could acquire, if at all, only after long study and examination."

"Likely it's ter spike that gun, that Mac's been East. The boys says so. But I bet on Collis P. all the same. Ding that 'Clarion'!" she continued, whipping from one topic to another with astonishing suddenness. "They're cluckin' to the U. P.'s now to pass us and come on to Californy; an' howlin' about pushin' the Southern Pacific to bust the C. P. If I was Governor Stanford I'd mortgage my chance o' heaven, maybe a little bit o' the other place, but what I'd git holt o' that Southern Pacific."

"What is the Southern Pacific expecting to do?"

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"Build across the continent and have a competin' line."

"What? Two railroads? Surely, one will be enough."

"If them four git a holt of it, they 'll put it acrost all right. One line? They 'll be half a dozen some day. An' you bet the C. P.'s won't let nobody git the start of them if they only git a fair show."

The strange town stirred Esther's imagination. Like a flock of vagrant, ugly birds, the shacks and flimsy wooden houses squatted on the inhospitable mountain-top, or huddled beside the brawling stream. The most pretentious places were saloons, whose doors in warm afternoons stood open, frankly exhibiting not only means of putting "an enemy" into men's mouths "to steal away their brains," but also of putting a devil into men's hearts to steal their brothers' bread.

"We've had a right good town till jest lately," Sally B. explained. "There's a few pretty bad fellers landed a little spell ago, some the U. P. folks has druv out, I reckon; an' they're whoopin' up a little."

A very long tent caught Esther's eye.

"That's the dance-house," Sally B. said. "They've got an extra big troupe of Hurdy-Gurdies in now,—there's the place where they sleep just to the left there. Sufferin' ears! They make a racket at night, they an' the men. Ain't nothin' so bad's you might think 'bout them girls, though. Most of 'em comes from furrin parts, where their job ain't considered dis-respectable."

A little way from the town were the brush tepees of

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the Indians. By night their fires gleamed weirdly against the dark hills; and occasional screeches testified their possession of "wheesiky." By day they came into town, built fires, squatted in close circles about them, each man's blanket pinned, well lapped, to his neighbor's, forming a perfect breakwind on the outside, and a fire-reflector within. Here they gambled from dawn till dark. The women begged at back doors, or fought stray dogs at refuse piles for broken food; and after a find, distributed it among their lord gamesters. Nearly every squaw was tagged by a pappoose, or carried one at her back. Sometimes the pappoose was "pale."

All in the town carried arms, and there were occasional brawls; yet no stranger was molested who did not first molest. Here and there washing was hung to dry, with little garments among the large. And Esther felt that here, as elsewhere, love, sweetness, mothers' devotion and fathers' fidelity, leavened humanity, proclaimed decency master.

Night drew on, and the sleepy town awoke. Wood teams from the mountain chopping-camps rattled in. The clatter of animals feeding, human and otherwise, stirred the air. The evening train whistled in from the west, with mail, passengers, a few workmen, much forage, and supplies.

"Collis P.'s done the job!" cried the first trainman to enter the hotel. "His little game o' talk with the President won the tin. The bonds are issued!"

"When was it?" asked Sally B., excitedly.

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"Oh, weeks ago, probably. It was done 'fore Andy Johnson went out of the White House, anyway."

"How much bonds?"

"Two million four hundred thousand," the man said, rolling out the words slowly and respectfully.

A small sum enough for eyes that read to-day. Yet to a railroad of the present, forty millions could not mean more than that sum meant to the struggling Central Pacific.

The train came in from the Front, a lot of empty cars bumping over unsettled track. The most aristocratic traveller was glad of a chance to sit sidewise in a swaying box-car with sick Chinamen, weary and odorous prospectors, maimed shovellers going "in" to the hospital, perhaps with the corpse of some poor martyr to the iron highway.

To-night came Louis McLane, a distinguished-looking gentleman; yet great man as he was, and earnestly as Sally B. tried to make him comfortable, other matters overshadowed him.

"Them U. P. fellers laid seven and a half miles of track the other day." The story ran from lip to lip.

"Huh! I bet a game rooster George Gregory 'll beat that when the iron comes. It's on the way now, they say." Sally B. looked challengingly about.

Waiting at table did not prevent her keeping up with all the railroad news, it rather aided her in doing so; and her comments were a sort of daily oral editorial that most of her patrons believed in, and all enjoyed.

"The U. P.'s discharged twelve engineers 'cause

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they would n't run at night," another loquacious diner remarked.

"Don't wonder they refused," a man from the East replied. "The grades are ticklish; the track ain't half finished, to say nothin' o' being settled; and the Injuns are raisin' Cains in triplets. Have you heard of the last fight?"

"Tell us," several urged; and he continued.

"A lot of Sioux and Cheyennes captured a freight, and wounded the fireman fatally. All the trainmen but the engineer ran away; he stayed by till he see the poor feller pass on three hours later. The Injuns got in next and burned the bridge near Alkali; thought they'd wreck the passenger that was to foller. Division Superintendent Nichols started with an engine from Alkali to the wrecked freight train; but them red devils got between him and the wreck. Then he put up the fight of his life; he let loose with his Spencer, and fought them off,— there must have been a thousand of 'em; some one counted more than a hundred about one fire, and there were fires everywhere, with yelling Injuns dancing round 'em like hell broke loose. Nichols got back to Alkali safe, stopped the passenger by telegraph, and wired for troops. When they came, how may Injuns do you suppose they found? Nary a redskin!"

"That's the way it's been all the time over on the U. P.," a second stranger added. "Workmen never have had proper protection. I was on the Denver line, and the Chief of Construction telegraphed for more force, saying, 'I have to fight while I dig.' But

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the Company did n't help him out. Why, we had ten Injun fights in ten weeks. From one to seven white men killed every time. It was n't fun, you can bet!"

Esther was in the dining-room, and heard. The dreadful day at the stage station came to her. Her father's last word when he went out with the stock, the early morning attack, the yells, the ping of arrows on the tiny window shutters, the louder spat of bullets on the stone walls, the glare of the burning barn, Gideon's ceaseless rain of lead from the port-holes! Gideon had leaped from boy to man that day. How strong he was! How tireless! For her he fought. "Save one bullet for yourself, Stella," he said, paling with his only spasm of fear when she told him the lead was gone. "Don't let them get you alive, Star!" She shuddered, and he looked at her with the dawn of that passion she later so dreaded. "You must do it yourself, Moppett; I sha'n't be alive then!" It seemed as if she would faint, but he spurred her on with fresh work. "The pewter! Melt it, Stella. Melt everything that will melt. We'll hold 'em back till dark!" And they did it! Dark came, the yells receded, the stage arrived, but not her father; instead, Uncle Billy and—Alfred.

Across the way violins began to twang, arousing Esther from her reverie. The caller's voice came clear, and the low, seductive rumble of dancing feet. One by one, the men finished eating and went out. The voice of the town called louder and louder. Esther wondered, were she a man, if the calls would seem hideous, as now; or would she, in the very joy of

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masculine freedom, look around, join the fringe of the curious onlookers, be caught by the siren, Temptation, and drawn into the human vortex, carried down—down!

Of all the guests Mr. McLane alone was left. He ate slowly in dignified silence, pried upon intermittently by Yic Wah. The wheedling voice of the town had no fascination for Mr. McLane. He went at once to his room, attended by Sally B.

Hardly had they gone when Yic Wah entered cautiously, peering about furtively as if seeking lurking enemies in impossible hiding-places, and gesticulating wildly.

"Misee Estee, you t'ink McLane bu'n up lailload, hotel, all?"

"Oh, no, no, Yic Wah! What makes you think that? Mr. McLane's a gentleman, not a bad man."

"Yes, yes! He velly bad man! Mistee Blown, he say McLane, he bu'n up Cha'ley Clocker, lailload, all!"

"Oh, you don't understand, Yic Wah," Esther began, striving for some way of explaining to the Oriental; but she could not stem his flood of excited words.

"Mistee McLane, he belly muchee bad man. He no likee Cha'ley Clocker. He no likee our lailload. All time he ketchee heap big money. Ketchee heap plenty lailload. Likee ketchee C. P., too! He ketchee plenty housee, plenty hossee, plenty stagee. He t'ink he heap big man, allee same Plesident." With his arms Yic Wah swept in the universe to him—

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self with each enumeration. "He t'ink God muchee likee him. Bime by he die. Jesus Chlist heapee fool him! S-z-z-ip!" He made a marvellous gyration downward and shuffled off to his kitchen; and Esther was still laughing when Sally B. returned.

"That fool, Sam Brown, 'll git Yic Wah inter trouble yet. Anyway, even Chinamen can't git fur away from the railroad. It sorter seems to hold an' float everything, like the ocean does fish."

The two women chatted a little longer, when Esther, still tired from her night spent sitting up in the car, went to her bed.

But not to sleep. Unhindered by tent walls the drone of the fiddles came in at her open window; and the clink of glasses, the rhythmic beat of many feet, the voices of the dancing girls between sets. As the night deepened, other sounds thrust themselves upon Esther's notice, rose above the dancers' lesser tumult, died away, and left her to wonder again about the women in the great tent. What manner of girls—women—were they? Flesh and blood, of course, like herself; somewhere, somehow, mothered and fathered; somehow reared, with hearts to feel and souls to be saved. But what sort of parents? What kind of homes? What had they endured, what fates dared, that they must come over ocean and land, out to the far desert end of the earth to lure men to death through song, dance, and drink? Did God remember them? Was He not their God, and her own?

Suddenly a great humility came to Esther, flooding her with deep distaste for her own life. How had she

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shown thankfulness for the boon of health, of friends, training, wealth,— all that was between her and these poor girls? Had she not wasted her days in idle longing? Among even the noisy dancers yonder might there not be some one better, according to her miserable opportunity, than she herself had been with her wider chance? It should be so no longer! When the last tie was laid she would return to her home, her city. She would cease her foolish waiting for Alfred; and somehow, wherever the way opened, she would work for those less fortunate than herself, would put herself on record for the better side of life.

A peace long unknown stole over her; and she slept tranquilly.

CHAPTER VIII

THE STROKE OF THE FANG

THE days ran happily by for Esther, so far as she remained in her own little world. It was a joy to be with Uncle Billy a short late hour every other night when his train was in and his reports made ; a joy to know that her presence comforted Sally B., whose heart, despite her busy life, longed for her only child, and grieved for the older child who dogged her footsteps, did her errands, followed her with meek, trustful eyes. The spell of the desert, and her ever deferred hope of seeing Alfred, still held Esther. Yet the town was growing distasteful to her. She began to suspect the venomous fangs concealed beneath its quiet exterior.

The Harmons arrived, tarried a few days, and went on to the Front, where they were guests of the Gregorys, Mrs. Harmon to remain till the celebration of the laying of the last tie, the Judge to make, meantime, a hurried trip to the Mormon metropolis. Soon after her arrival Esther had sent for her saddle mare; and horseback excursions became her daily recreation.

Bill Bernard, though rosy and physically vigorous, was yet without memory or initiative ; content to live from day to day with neither ambition nor regret. Yet Esther found him a satisfactory escort for her rides. The prospector's habit of silence still lingered,

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and was welcome to her. At rare intervals he became voluble, when his wife was his theme; and Esther, loving her, listened sympathetically to his child-like fairy tales of her industry, her wisdom, her beauty, her fidelity to the House of Bernard.

Gideon was in the town, though he kept out of Esther's way. Sally B. met him abruptly one day, forced a kind word upon him and asked him of his stay; but he evaded her with a half coherent reply about seeing the railroad through. She mentally substituted Esther for the railroad, knowing it was for chance glimpses of her he hung around the town.

The grading was finished. Engineers, their occupation gone, had already started for new barrens to measure. Bridge-builders followed. Men of the pick-axe and shovel, drillers, strikers, teamsters, Chinese, cooks, scullions, camp-movers,—a long procession faced westward toward "Californy, God's country." The most of these were honest, law-abiding men. Yet among them were some criminals, the scum of this sturdy human stream; and into the towns by the way, as flotsam caught by eddies, this element settled, to inoculate with the germ of activity whatever of criminality might be lying dormant.

It was the morning before George Gregory's great day, the day he was to outdo the Union Pacific feat of laying seven and a half miles of track at one stretch. He had chosen the flat spaces eastward by Kelton, where the grade was easy, culverts and bridges few. Everything was in readiness. The iron was coming — on the road — due at the Front that afternoon. All

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along the line betting ran high. Interest and excitement pervaded town, camp, and home; touched even women and children.

The supply train backed, switched, loaded freight brought in the night before; yet did not pull out for the Front as usual, but side-tracked and waited. The iron was coming! Everything was delayed, shifted, shunted, to leave a clear track for the iron,—iron that was worth almost its weight in silver; iron that had been bought by telegraph, packed across the Isthmus, and pushed on to the Front; iron that was to make to-morrow the world's record day in track laying; iron that was to win miles of highway, and half the land on either side twenty miles deep!

It was due at noon.

Hotel patrons had eaten and gone. Bill Bernard was out on an errand; and the house was deserted save for the cook and scullion, and the two women at their late breakfast. The sun had not yet thawed the frost of the night when a shot rang out from Sally B.'s barroom.

She caught her pistol from some near nook and rushed out, Esther flying after her.

"Go back, child!" Sally B. said sternly, from the doorway.

"Not unless you go," Esther returned in a voice as firm.

"Foller still, then," the other whispered, seeing opposition useless; and they entered the barroom noiselessly.

A man with beetling brows and fierce, resentful eyes stood with his back to them, holding a big

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revolver somewhat unsteadily over Shack Newbegin, whose hands were high in air. The intruder's clothes were soiled, his boots dusty, and cut from much walking over rock. Notwithstanding his vicious, threatening attitude, his body drooped as from intense fatigue.

He did not hear the women; and his savage, low-spoken command showed him dangerously sure of himself.

"Give me ten dollars out of that till. Do it quick, and keep still. And don't try shooting next time when a man asks you for money; you might get your wooden overcoat sooner'n you'd like. Hurry up there!"

"Drop that gun, pardner!" Sally B. said quietly.

She had waited barely a breath on the threshold, yet Esther had smelled burned powder, seen Shack's pistol on the floor, his dishevelled hair, and the bullet hole in the marauder's hat. Shack had had the first shot. How had the other mastered the situation?

The man wheeled, with blazing eyes, to meet Sally B.'s pistol barrel almost at his head. His own weapon, unconsciously lowered, left him helpless, though he made a slight motion as if to lift it.

"Drop it, I say! Let go!" Her revolver touched his temple, and her black eyes blazed a message that compelled obedience.

He returned her look for an instant, lowered his eyes sullenly, glanced covertly about, and, stooping, laid the pistol on the floor.

"Now, git inter that cheer!"

Again he looked at her resentfully; but only for a

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breath, when he bent stiffly, and dropped heavily down.

"Tie him, Shack, to the cheer; an' his hands behind him, an' his feet together. How 'd he git the drop on ye? I see ye got the first shot."

"Yes. But I reckoned he was only a drunk, an' was n't lookin' fur him to fight. I only shot to skeer; but he jumped me like greased lightnin'."

"He looks holler; I 'low grub ain't ben plenty. Had anything to eat lately?" she asked her prisoner.

He shook his head sulkily.

"I thought so. Watch him, Shack," she ordered, and after the tying was done to her satisfaction, the two women went out.

They returned shortly, Sally B. with a generous breakfast; Esther, who refused to let her come alone, carrying the coffee. They arranged the food on a chair, and Sally B. took up her revolver again.

"Untie his hands, Shack."

"You 're the beatin'est," Shack began, obeying her order reluctantly, "to go an' feed a man that's tried to rob ye!"

"No matter. He's hungry. I would n't turn a hungry dog off without a bone. Git to work, now," she said gruffly to the bandit. "An' while yo're busy, tell me what you wanted of ten dollars. Why did n't ye ask fur the hull till?"

"Because I wanted to be white an' take only enough to get out of the country with." Esther thought his face softened a trifle.

"Why don't ye work for it? The Boss wants

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choppers; an' everybody's flyin' west like ole Nick was after 'em."

"That's my business. I want to leave the country, not chop wood." The sullen look deepened.

"If yo're that partic'lar, you git that grub out o' sight, an' git! I earn my money workin', an' you can yourn."

He scowled at her; and no one saw the gleam in his wicked eye as he caught the flash from Esther's solitaire.

It was the only ornament of value she wore in this rude place. She had bought it for protection, and it had served its purpose well. Most people supposed it an engagement ring, a supposition she tacitly encouraged.

The man ate hungrily, and finished with a surly "Thank you."

"Which way are you going?"

"West."

"We'll take yo' weepson, an' watch ye a piece out on the track. Shack, you keep an eye an' a gun on him till he gits to the turn. Ye need n't come back fur another meal o' victuals," she continued to the fellow. "If ye do, ye'll find more'n one gun p'inted yore way. Skedaddle!"

"He's ben layin' round the town fur weeks, that cuss has; but I missed him yisterday," Shack said as the man started off slowly. "Thought he'd lit out."

Esther watched him with mingled aversion and pity; but Sally B. was already in conference with one of the railroad office boys that "lettered well," getting out a

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"Warning!" to be posted on one of the town's bulletin spaces. Whatever the reprobate might next undertake could not be done there. The town kept open eyes by night as well as by day.

The iron train was two hours late, and the desert day so alluring that Esther decided to ride as usual. Immediately after the noon dinner her mount was brought to the door; but her kindly knight was missing. This was not alarming. His memory often failed him in the daily routine, when he saddled his horse and wandered alone in the hills hunting for "color," but always returned safe; and on such occasions Esther patiently went without her ride. But to-day she was disappointed. She wanted to get away from the memory of the morning. "Had any one seen him go?" she asked. And Shack, hearing her question, told her that "Bill had saddled not a quarter-hour ago, an' lit out west, down the track."

"I can overtake him, then," she said to Sally B. as she mounted.

"I don't like ter see ye start off alone," Sally B. said; yet she was too fearless herself to suspect danger; and her protest was perfunctory.

"I 'll find Mr. Bernard shortly; don't worry about me."

"Look out for that there breakfast guest of our'n. If you met up with him, he might take a shine to you, or yore mare."

"My lungs are good. And section men are too plenty and Swift's heels too nimble for any man on foot to hurt me," Esther replied nonchalantly.

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"Besides, he'll be far toward Wells by this time. That's his first chance for supper."

Mounted, she was a joy to all who saw her. She rode away gayly, humming a little song. There was frost every month in the year at Toano; yet the mercury often ran past the hundred mark in the summer days; and the heat began early in the season. This day was unusually warm. Esther wore a light habit that suited her well, and contrasted strikingly with the mare's ebony coat. Many admiring eyes followed the pair westward. One man went where his eyes led.

It was good to be out in the open this perfect day, to be alone. She kept on the lookout for her cavalier, expecting momentarily to overtake him. Presently she spied him climbing a high hillside to the north. It looked hot and breathless over there. She knew the succession of ridge and hollow in that direction. No wide, level spaces for gallops, no open vistas. She would not go. She would have this one long afternoon to herself, listen for voices that spoke only to the solitary ear. She rode slowly, making sub-conscious notes of the smooth, trodden path beside the track, at places where she would give the mare her head when returning in the cooler afternoon.

A patch of brilliant desert flowers in a small nook where the melting snow had been gathered and held caught her capricious eye. She would be hidden from the town here, yet not far from the track and passing trackmen. It would be quite safe. Dismounting, she gathered a great bunch of the sun-colored blossoms, and

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tucked them in hat and habit front. She uncoiled the Mexican hair rope from beneath her saddle flap; and, giving Swift forty feet of freedom, sat down, back to the track, to memories and day dreams,—day dreams that purloined time unheeded, till the iron train thundered past.

Eyes that caught the vision of beauty in horse and rider silhouetted against the gray hillside lighted with sudden appreciation; and one pair flamed up curiously, watched eagerly till the vision vanished, then gloomed above set teeth and clenched hands.

Esther remounted and resumed her ride, still slowly. The mood for a speed had not come. A short distance farther on she came to a deep, curving cut. Instantly on entering an uncanny sensation possessed her, a presentiment of danger. Yet she derided herself, and touched Swift to a lope. Had not the train just passed? What menace could arrive in ten minutes?

Along the banks were a few cave-like depressions, cut for some purpose by the graders. As Esther rounded the curve a fleeting glimpse of a horseman coming toward the cut from the other end was interrupted by the voice of a man who sprang from one of the little holes and caught her bridle rein.

"I'll trouble you for that sparkler, Miss; and don't take too much time getting off your glove. Keep them ruby lips shut, too, I might add by way of friendly advice."

Esther was looking into the barrel of a pistol held by the man she had that morning served with coffee. It was not courage that came quicker than reason to

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her; rather, a swift anger that this creature should presume to molest her.

"How dare you?" she cried fearlessly, striking the hand on her bridle a stinging blow with her whip. In the instant of surprise and pain that made him release her, she whirled the mare on two feet, and was off.

Three shots rang out behind her. She heard the whizz of a bullet perilously near, yet raced wildly on, every sense alert to keep her horse's feet from pitfalls. No sounds followed her. She knew the man would not dare show himself, would probably hide from the other rider if possible; and the mare was putting the miles behind her in marvellously few minutes.

Esther began to breathe more freely. Near the town she slowed to a walk, and looked back. Neither miscreant nor horseman could be seen. She stopped to put herself to rights. Her heart was beating fast, yet as much from the rapid riding as from fear, she told herself. All had happened so quickly, it now scarcely seemed real. Dread of making a scene was stronger than fear for what had passed; and it nerved her to ride quietly up to the hotel.

Sally B. met her at the door in great excitement. "Mrs. Gregory an' Mrs. Harmon both telegraphed you to come on an' see the show termorrer. I been hopin' ye'd fly in 'fore the train left. I got yer things all packed!"

The train stood on the track less than a stone's throw distant, its time just up. The conductor came forward as Esther dismounted.



"HOW DARE YOU?" SHE CRIED

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ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

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STROKE OF THE FANG

"Will you go, Miss Anthony? I'll hold her ten minutes for you."

"Thank you. Yes, I'll go. Five minutes will do."

With Sally B.'s help she changed to another gown, and sped downstairs.

"You're lightning, sure!" the conductor said with respectful approval, as he took her bags, helped her into the high box-car, made her as comfortable as he could, and went about his train work.

Following a half-hour behind the iron train, the little engine struggled noisily along for a time, dragging its string of loaded cars, when it came to a sudden halt on a mountain-side grade. Around a curve and just beyond, the track left the mountain and crossed a gorge over a trestle. The forward brakeman came running back with blanched face and a ghastly message.

"The trestle's gone down! The iron train's wrecked, and piled up down there!" he finished, pointing with a trembling finger forward.

CHAPTER IX

AMBROSIA IN ARCADIA

PASSENGERS and trainmen went forward to investigate. Left alone, Esther leaned far out of the door and peered forward, but could see nothing of them. In front the train curved out of sight around the shoulder of the mountain. An undulating sweep of white sand and gray sage-brush stretched on either side to the horizon,—that was all. Breathless and apprehensive, she waited. She could hear the steady hiss of escaping steam, an occasional shout far beyond; for the rest, desert silence.

It was late in the afternoon, yet the sand reflected the heat in pulsing waves, burning her cheek. She climbed down after a little, and walked forward, meeting one of the brakemen.

"Go back, Miss Anthony! It's no place for you—it's not—"

"Oh, what is it?" she interrupted anxiously. "Is any one hurt? Can't I help?"

"No; not now, anyway. No one can help one poor fellow; he's passed in his checks. We're trying to dig the other out before he dies."

Esther felt faint, yet kept pace with his hurrying steps.

"Miss Anthony, won't you please go into that car next? It's rough, but we'll need this for—for—" They were beside the rear car now.

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"Yes, yes, I will—I know. But can't I do something? Won't you—"

"No, you can help most by staying right here—the conductor said so. But it may be hours—you'll roast in the car—"

"Never mind me. Don't wait—I'll manage."

He passed her and hurried into the car. In a moment he ran by again with blankets, a basin, and a bucket of water.

The car he had designated was partly filled with a great pile of cabbages, and looked rather impossible. Esther sat down on the end of a tie in the shade of the train and waited. Resourceful and efficient, the woman's part was especially distasteful to her. Yet here obedience was evidently the best service. Still, the hours were long.

A sharp chill warned her at last of the sinking sun. Behind her in the western sky the gorgeous cloud-drama of the desert had begun, a drama no words can picture for eyes that have not seen; one that needs no words for those who can remember it. Esther watched it as never before. Swiftly the shifting masses of color took shape, became cathedrals, kneeling congregations, armies in battle; flushed, paled, darkened forbodingly, or flamed fire-red to the zenith. Esther, unstrung by the afternoon's shock, and by the wreck coming on the heels of it, felt herself lifted out of the obvious and carried into some ominous borderland of the spirit. She dreaded the coming of the dark with unreasoning terror.

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But while the sky was yet red, welcome voices broke the spell. Four men came around the curve, holding carefully by the corners a blanket litter supporting a torn, bleeding form. Esther stepped between the cars, and with averted eyes waited for them to pass. With gentlest care they lifted him into the car. The sufferer moaned unconsciously, and Esther tried to believe that he knew nothing of his pain. Four more men appeared with a laden blanket; this was a winding-sheet. The men spoke no word, and were uncovered. Their burden, too, they bore on to the last car. Three more followed, one walking feebly, supported by the others, the conductor and brakeman of the supply train. He was pale, hatless and coatless, with a scarlet stain on neck and collar. Yet he was conscious, speaking freely.

"Don't mind me," he was saying.

"Alfred!" Esther sprang toward the trio, and caught one limp hand swinging by his side.

He straightened with sudden vigor; a wave of color warmed his pale cheek. "Stella! Stella!" he repeated, and stood still, gazing at her.

"Put him in here!" she cried, now awake, and ready for action. "I'll take care of Mr. Vincent—make him comfortable."

"I'm not hurt," Alfred interrupted, "it's scarcely a scratch! I must help the boys in the other car. They—"

The conductor interposed. "Obey orders, Vincent. You're used up. We've help enough in there. You've done your part."

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The two men, not heeding his protest, lifted him into the cabbage-car.

"Now, Miss Anthony, let us help you in."

"No, not now, thank you. I've something to do first. You're not ready to start, are you?"

"No, it will be a half-hour anyway; we must make one more trip to the wreck."

"I can get in by myself. Don't think about me." Even the conductor, accustomed to command, yielded to the finality in her voice, and hurried on.

"Can you sit against the car side a few minutes, Alfred? You won't faint?"

"Faint?" he scouted. "Indeed, no. But where are you going? Don't leave me, Stella!" he called a little wildly as she stepped back a pace.

Perplexities, embarrassments, were forgotten. In this solemn moment of tragedy they resumed their old relations, unquestioning.

"I'll be back in a minute. Here! You may keep this for me!" She tossed him her hat. "A hat is a pretty sure anchor for a woman, is n't it?" she said, smiling up at him, and was out of sight around the end of the train.

She could not help the gayety in her voice. The world was alive once more. Life was beautiful in spite of the grewsome sights in the car beyond. Since she could do nothing for them she would not think of them. Alfred was here; hurt, yes, but not unto death, not even to great pain. For one little moment she would selfishly hug her joy.

Down in a little swale, just before they had halted,

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she had noticed the bunch-grass growing long and rank. She flew at it, tore it up, handful by handful, till she had a high pile, which she gathered in her arms and carried to the car. Pitching it in, she was off again, heedless of Alfred's protest. Three times she made the short journey, pausing at the door after the third load to catch her breath.

"Are n't you coming in this time? You must let me help you," he said, partly rising but falling back.

"No, no! Don't move! You are n't able to; and if you do I won't come!" she replied emphatically, though her face was shining. "Turn your head away, and don't look till I say, 'Here!'"

"I can't turn away from you, Stella!" he said whimsically, yet tenderly; and her eyes dropped. Still, she did not move.

"Oh, come, dearest, won't you? Don't wait so long. I'll—I'll turn—'My true love sent me a letter to turn back my head.' Did you ever play 'Green Gravel,' when you were a little tad? My head is 'turned back.'"

Esther never knew how she managed the climb through the great, gaping door, yards above the sloping ground; still, she was there, standing before him.

He spoke no word, but gazed up into her tender, bending face. Light speech that had bridged the first tense moments was impossible now. Pain, misunderstanding, pride, prudence, even the years, fled. She loved him, loved him! Nothing else counted.

"Lean down, Stella, sweetheart!" he whispered at last, his eyes drawing her with his words.

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She knelt beside him. The long separation melted into the land of the unremembered.

The engine whistle startled them shortly, and a brakeman came with a blanket for Alfred, his coat, and Esther's bags and cloak.

"Will the fireman live?" Alfred asked, while Esther helped him into his coat.

"We think so, but can't tell surely, of course. Poor fellow! He's conscious now." The sympathy in the man's tones brought Esther's tears.

"Could I do anything? Some—" she began haltingly.

"I'm sure I can," Alfred exclaimed, half rising again.

The brakeman waved him back. "Miss Anthony, don't let him! He had a pretty good shaking up himself; but that's nothing to what he did. No one knows how he ever pried that wheel off from poor Dooly's leg; but he did, and held it free till we came, the sun broiling him like a beefsteak, and Dooly begging all the time to be put out of his misery. That's enough for one day. You keep him right here."

Alfred tried vainly to stop the story. The brakeman finished, prompted by Esther's eager, appreciative face. Yet he left them shortly, and the train started. Then Esther turned toward the cabbages.

"What in the world—" Alfred began.

"I'm captain now," she interrupted. "I'm going to make you comfortable before the last shred of daylight goes."

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"It won't be dark; there's a moon."

"Much light a four-days-old moon will give!" she scoffed.

"But I'm comfortable now, if you will only come and sit beside me."

Heedless of his importuning, she continued piling the cabbages away till one forward corner was bare.

"What's that for?"

"You must sleep; and it will be bitter cold. This is —"

"Sleep! Sleep to-night, with you here? Never!"

She smiled at him, yet persisted, throwing the soft grass in the corner, smoothing it carefully. "Come. Let me help you over here. It is too cold there by the door."

"Dear tyrant!" He smiled happily, and pulled himself up by the door-handle. But he was unsteady, and would have fallen had she not supported him. For once she was grateful for her strength.

"Lie down. I think you'll find that a tolerable substitute for a hair mattress."

"The worm turns. I won't! I'll sit down, though, and in that corner, if you'll sit beside me."

She demurred, to indulge him finally; and, seated side by side on the floor, with cabbages tumbling about their feet, they wandered in Arcadia. Amabel, Esther's hiding, Alfred's capture and illness, his search for her, college and business life,—it was a tale of the years told by the light of the thin desert moon.

But Gideon's part in the story Esther modified, allowing Alfred to believe that her flight from Colfax

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had been the impulsive result of fear for him; as was her wild race to Virginia City.

"Life begins now where it forsook us years ago when Amabel Hamilton asked me to button her shoe in the Colfax parlor."

"No. Life does not forsake, it tests us," Esther replied.

The engine wheezed, puffed ineffectually, and stood still.

"Oh, can there be some new trouble?" cried Esther.

"I guess by the sound they've only stopped for kindling wood," Alfred surmised.

Esther looked out. Men were running here and there about in the brush, more discernible by ear than by eye. They filled their arms with towering loads of sage, and returned with them to the engine, crushing the pungent stuff into the fire-box. Slowly the wheels began to turn. The men kept alongside, piling the tender high, till the summit was reached. Three times they had thus to reinforce their small stock of green Sierra wood before the journey was ended.

The night grew colder. When the car stood still, the biting air swept through and chilled the two in spite of the glow at their hearts. Esther bustled about, chafing his hands, protecting the wound in his head with her handkerchief, and tucking in the blanket more closely, while he surreptitiously pulled it loose, that it might be tucked again. A vagrant lock of her hair brushed his face as she leaned over him.

"Tell me, Stella, what have you done to your

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pretty hair; something's turned all its gold to—to dark, autumn-tinted brown. It's lovely, though."

"Not I, but the salt Pacific, turned my gold to rust. It treats nearly all desert gold so, especially if the gold is on young heads."

At last they touched more serious things.

"But don't you know how you came to be liberated from that awful place?"

"No," Alfred replied to her question; "nor how I came there. I only know that after Cadwallader, Gideon, and I had looked over Gideon's prospect we climbed down the mountain to where the horses were tied. Mine was gone."

"Only yours?"

"Only mine. 'We'll look up your nag,' Gideon said; 'you stay here.' Cadwallader came back alone a little later, to see if my horse had returned; but it had n't; and Cad went away again. It was nearly dark then. Perhaps it was only minutes, it seemed hours, that I wandered around, when something hit me on the head. The next I knew I was in an old tunnel, chained to the heavy timbers."

"Oh, oh!" Esther moaned.

"I was well in from the mouth, and only a little light came in by day; at night it was Egyptian darkness. Some one brought me food. Food!" he repeated with a shiver. "What I did n't eat tasted best."

"Oh, my poor love!" Esther murmured unsteadily.

"I counted the days at first, then lost the count. That terrified me more than all the rest."

"How long was it? You learned afterward?"

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"Nearly a month."

"Don't you know where the place is?"

"No. No one does, except the miscreants who put me there."

"They have never found — don't they know?"
Esther faltered.

"Not a word. I never saw my jailer. He used a dark lantern and came only at night. I never heard his voice; he always whispered. I think he was an Indian. The night he freed me, and told me to go, a gun at my back hurried me, warned me neither to look around nor speak. I hastened along a steep path that led from the mouth of the tunnel. Dearest, you can never know what rapture it was to see the stars again! I can only guess how far I went before I fell, striking my head. When I recovered consciousness I could n't stand, but crept on slowly in the darkness."

Esther stroked his hand softly, but did not speak.

"I don't know how far, or what happened. I —"

"And then?" she questioned as he halted.

"The hospital at Sacramento. I opened my eyes to sanity more than three months after the trip to Gideon's mine."

"And you've been in danger since, many times, have n't you?"

"Oh, no; not often. Don't fancy me charging danger every day, sweetheart, like a modern Saint George."

"Yet, your business in San Francisco — I know you had enemies, have them now — Company's enemies."

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"Well, that need trouble you no more. I'm to have other work to do. I did have one escape there; it might have been my end. One night a ruffian caught me from behind on a dark street; and some one else immediately wrenched him away, and whispered in my ear, 'Run!' I have n't the slightest idea who either of them was, though I've tried hard to discover the man who saved me."

Esther listening, breathless, knew it must have been Gideon; but she was mute.

A chill hand on her cheek startled her. "Out of the blanket against orders!" she exclaimed. "When did you eat last? And please keep the blanket snug," she coaxed.

"This — no, yesterday morning. I received a message to come on to the Front at once, just after arriving at Elko from another trip; took the first train out, which happened to be the iron train, did telegraphing at Toano that used up my dinner time, and — you know the rest."

Esther detected growing weakness in his voice. "I must get you some supper,— breakfast, I guess it will be," she said decisively.

He laughed. "From where?"

"From our larder," she answered jauntily. "Fortunately, it is full, and raw cabbage is digestible."

She pulled open a head, and shredded some of the crisp centre into the hollow of a large leaf. "Now, you are to be full of faith,— 'faith is the substance of things hoped for,'—you must believe this an elegant repast. Also be sentimental, fancy the touch of my

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—supply your own adjectives—the touch of my fingers adds a most piquant flavor. No; I shall feed you.”

“I’ll behave if you’ll tuck me in again,” he said with mock humility, taking the white bits from her fingers. “Why, it’s good!”

“Certainly. I intended you to say that. Don’t be in haste. You were very hungry. I’ve dessert, also; this is to be a course dinner.” She surprised him with a box of candy from one of her bags. “Uncle Billy’s gift, and right from Sacramento,” she explained.

She laid the several kinds on different cabbage leaves, and teased him tantalizingly as she wisely dallied with her serving.

“This is the third time you’ve presided at my early morning table: first as my desert rose, next as Juliet, now —”

“As Railroad Bridget.”

He was taking a lover’s way of making her retract the lowly name, when a distant gleam warned him of the journey’s end. “There’s Toano! We’ll be there in twenty minutes! I have n’t said half I wish. Oh, my darling, I’m just the same nameless man! I’ve nothing to offer you. Will you wait still a little longer? Stella, I’ve no right to this taste of heaven; I’ve been cheating you,” he finished ruefully.

“I think—I think I’d rather be so cheated than have any other man’s honesty,” she said, with her first touch of shyness.

“Yet you must now know the truth about me. I ought to have told you before. My father thought me a

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thief, turned me adrift, forbade me to use his name. Until I can prove him in the wrong, I cannot offer you the only name I'm willing you should have."

"But how could he call you a thief? He ought to know you simply could n't steal. You steal!" Her eyes blazed, and she lifted her head proudly.

Her dear faith warmed him, yet his voice was sad.

"No, I did n't steal, but I caused some one else to do it. And my father had every right to believe me guilty." His voice dropped; his eyes were shadowy.

"But you never meant to! He should have known that," she persisted vehemently.

"God knows I did n't mean it; but fire burns, whether one falls in or jumps in." He gazed past her into the dim desert.

She caressed his cheek, but was silent.

"It's a long story—I'll tell it all some day. You'll like to hear about Max, Max Ober, my lifelong friend, as his father and mine were always friends. They were poor boys together; but my father grew rich rapidly; Mr. Ober has always been poor. Yet Max was his only son and idol; and both fathers tried to prevent Max and me from recognizing the part that money played in our lives."

"How foolish!"

"Worse! It was criminal. I was the older, the leader, Max's model. He came to college when I entered my junior year, and I took him at once into my own rollicking clique. We were n't vicious, only silly, indulging in various costly pranks that seem to

AMBROSIA IN ARCADIA

spring from a young cub's desire to destroy things, the same whether it's boy, bear, or pup. Afterward I knew how Mr. Ober had crippled himself that Max might return my dinners at five dollars a plate, or light his Havanas with currency. Remittances from home did not begin to suffice. Max borrowed heavily, his association with me making that dangerously easy, and left college when I did, greatly in debt. We both entered my father's bank."

A double whistle warned them of the approaching station.

"Oh, it was the same old story," Alfred continued hastily. "Mr. Ober, broken in health, called for a part of Max's salary. Max, beside himself, falsely proud toward me, and genuinely anxious to spare his father, shunned every one, pinched, paid a little, but not fast enough. Then he began to gamble, successfully at first, but afterwards losing; and then he plunged, and dipped into the bank's till. I happened upon him one night after all the others had gone. He was toiling feverishly at his books, a loaded pistol at his side. I forced from him the whole story." He stopped, and Esther saw his jaw set sternly.

"Yet you, Alfred—" she began, but he went on without heeding her.

"For the first time I realized the moral obligation money imposes, the Mephistophelian part I had played in Max's life. I beat down his objections, made him transfer to my account his doctored bank record, and pledged him to secrecy. Since we had been fools together, we should repent together. I had n't a tenth

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of the money needed to pay; but I would tell my father, ask him for time to work out the deficit."

"And would n't your father?" Esther began indignantly.

"Before I could explain, the secret expert discovered me, reported to my father. He refused me a hearing, disowned me, commanded me to drop his name, a name all Boston honors. That hurt worst of all." He finished and dropped his eyes.

"Alfred, don't look down, look up! You've done a grand, a heroic thing! No matter how long we have to wait!" She rose to her feet, her face glowing with love and pride.

He stood beside her, cheered by her eager approval. "I said it was the same, but it is n't; I'm thousands nearer. Gideon helped to—"

"Alfred, I've such a lot of money! Let me—"

"Never yours, dear love. I must earn my own way to my name, our name."

"Oh, can't you let me help you a little, Alfred? It's been such a long, hard way!"

"Not much longer—it may be any day, sweetheart. I expect to sell some mining property for more than enough to pay in full. I shall know surely next week."

The engine stopped. They were at Toano; and Sally B. was flying out to meet them.

CHAPTER X

IN THE LITTLE SPOT WHERE THE POSIES GROW

"STELLA, dear, Gideon's dying!" Sally B. said solemnly as Esther walked by her side to the hotel. "Come to him quick 's you can. He ain't done nothin' but call fur you."

Speechless, Esther hurried upstairs close behind Sally B.

"They found him with a bullet in him down by Big Bend Cut," Sally B. went on, as she led the way to Gideon's room. "Some o' the woodmen found him. His horse bucked when that cuss fired at you. That's how he got the drop on Gid; that, an' Gid's fear at first that he'd hit you."

"Is he conscious?" Esther whispered.

"Yes. Mind's clear as a diamond. Jest wants you. He ain't sufferin' none, honey," she added hastily as she saw Esther's cheek pale. "Hunt yer pluck, child, fur Gid's sake." She clasped Esther in a warm embrace and left her at Gideon's door.

The physician, who had been summoned by special engine from Elko, came out to meet her. "Miss Anthony?" he asked. "I'm glad you've come. Hope you can grant his desire, whatever it may be. To see you, to speak with you, seems his only wish." Esther's strained face touched him. "Don't give way," he said kindly. "He does n't suffer. I've

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done what little I could to relieve him. He'll go without pain. I—'

"Oh, must he—is there no chance for—" she hesitated anxiously.

"None, Miss Anthony. And there are only minutes. Go in—give him his wish, if you can. I'll stay near; call me if you need me."

She entered, and he shut the door, leaving her alone with Gideon.

He turned his head feebly at her step.

"Moppett!"

She was down beside him, tears falling unheeded.

"Don't cry, Star! I'm not sorry. I'm glad to die."

"Oh, Gideon, don't say that! You must live—must—"

"Little Star!" His voice was tremulous with weakness. "I was n't—you'll be happy. I won't have to see him—" Each word was more difficult, and he waited for strength. "Is Vincent here?"

She nodded.

"Call him, Stella."

But when she moved to obey, his weak fingers closed over hers detainingly. "No, no! I can't do it!" he cried out with sudden strength. "After you rode out of town yesterday, I watched you a while through the glass, then went that way, Star—out that way—in time! Yes, in time! And before I saw you enter the Cut,—" he was silent an instant, his waiting soul in his eyes; "and ever since, too, I've said—I'd tell Vincent myself—"

WHERE THE POSIES GROW

"Gideon! Don't! It's past. You need not—"

"Sweet Star!" The tenderness in his faint words smote Esther. "I can't tell him. I can't spare the time from you—you've been so long—coming! But you'll tell him, Stella, won't you? Tell him that I—I—tried to be white—at last; but I'm only—oh, Stella! only an Injun! Oh, Star!" The last word was a despairing cry, almost inarticulate.

"No, no, Gideon! You've atoned. You've been brave and—"

His face was turned away. His eyes were closed, and Esther leaned closer, listening for his waning breath. Was this the last? She must call—no, he breathed more deeply. She laid her hand on his forehead, kissed his cheek softly.

At that he opened his eyes and smiled. "One promise, Stella. Will you?" He reached feebly for her hand.

She nodded. "If I can."

"Bury me—bury me out here—out—"

"Oh, Gideon, don't ask that! It's so far, so lonely!"

"No; it's—I love it! No mummery, only a little song and some words from the Book. In that spot where the posies—where you sat yesterday—only yesterday," he moaned faintly.

"Gideon, dear, how can we—" She took both his hands in her own.

"Promise, Star."

She bowed her head, her tears falling fast.

"Don't, Stella! I can't dry—" He paused, a new

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thought claiming him. "El Rancho Guerrero is yours."

She shook her head.

"Yes. Your father's brother was my—you must. You'll love it?" He searched her face anxiously.

She remembered the doctor's words, and acquiesced. "Yes, I'll love it—love it for your sake, Gideon, for the sake of the old times."

His eyes warmed almost to smiling.

She freed one hand and gently smoothed back the dark hair; and for a time he was quite still, content.

"The little arrow, did you—ever wear it?" he asked faintly. "I wish I could—see it in—your hair." The whispered words came with more effort.

"Did you send it, Gideon?" Her face lighted. "It is so beautiful!"

He smiled his reply, and his satisfaction.

"My room is next to this. Shall I get it?"

"Yes. But don't let—any one come. You—alone—I want."

Esther rose, wondering at such a fancy at such a moment; wondering if she ought to leave him. In a second she was back. Even as she went, she tossed her hair loosely on top of her head, as Gideon had liked it, and shot the glittering shaft through.

He watched her with fond eyes as she came to the bed and knelt down.

"You are very beautiful, Moppett," he whispered, as she took his hands again in hers.

Long he gazed into her face.

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She kissed him on cheek and forehead, at last lightly on the lips.

"Mine! Mine for this hour!" he said with a breath of his old passion. His eyes grew deep and darker with their strange, cryptic flash. "Oh, Star!" he whispered; "I tried—I—" He lifted his eyes to the ceiling and whispered faintly, "A life for a life."

A shaft of light struck the arrow.

"The sun!" He barely breathed the words.

He was very still after that, though his eyes came back to her face. The hands in hers grew chill, and she stirred.

"I must call—" she began, but he shook his head ever so little.

"Only you." His lips formed the words she scarcely heard.

The stillness crept on, and on, over all the room, over the face before her, into her own heart,—the stillness that was death. Only once his lips moved; it was to frame the old child-name, "Moppett."

The shaft of brilliance crept down from the gemmed arrow, down through the stillness, touched Gideon's night-black hair with light. And Esther saw that last, spent, outward breath that has no indrawn follower.

With the "little song," and words from "the Book," as he had asked, rough yet reverent men and women gave Gideon's beautiful earth-garment to the warm desert's keeping, to the posies, to the wide silences he loved.

CHAPTER XI

GREGORY'S VICTORY

THE cruel strain of the days just past told upon Esther. Still, Alfred was there—not by any means well, yet needing only rest, care, and Esther. This saved her from illness. Poor, loving Gideon, dying half happy with his hand in hers, her kiss on his lips, had not even in that moment rivalled Alfred. She turned to him now, her own ills forgotten in happy service for him; and by the bed he kept for a few days, she was spared the little town's excitement over the murder, the unsuccessful hunt for the criminal, the wreck, the sending away of the wounded man to be mended by man, the burial of the poor body whose soul had gone to be commended of God.

She was spared the ghastly news of Phineas, who, though too weak to face the poor life he had earned for himself, had not been afraid to send his dishonest soul to face the future. While waiting his trial he had hanged himself; had gone unrepentant, unshriven by atoning acts, to the Divine Tribunal. From crime to crime his life had continually descended. That he did not have to answer for murder was only because Gideon had discovered his plot, had saved Alfred. And Gideon died with the secret untold.

Days they toiled to rebuild the trestle that cunning

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hands had so secretly cut. One by one they carried heavy rails up the bank and piled them ready for loading. As Alfred recovered, Esther regained poise and strength; and together they went on to the Front, where they rejoiced the Harmons with their story.

At last the iron! The little left when the train was wrecked had carried them by the Kelton Flats, where Gregory had planned his great day's work. Now they must lay over rougher road,—over culverts, trestles, and grades that must be climbed.

For days the men had been idle. And Gregory had listened, with impatient replies, or in more impatient silence, to reports from the Union Pacific.

Uintah! Through the canyon!

"A holiday in Salt Lake City for every man, if the west-bound track-layers can overtake the graders before the Central Pacific arrives!" was the bribe the Union Pacific people offered their men.

"Their work is sham! The government will never accept it!" enemies of the same road averred. And Gregory prayed that this might be true. But it was not true. The Union Pacific road stood inspection, was accepted; and on they came.

Ogden! Still no iron for the Central Pacific! Red sparks scintillated in Gregory's sleepless eyes. Ogden! He might have been there now if the iron had come! His company might have tapped that rich valley, fetched and carried for the thrifty Mormons. Now that would be the juicy plum of the Union Pacific. And the Central Pacific must squat in this desert spot, beside the dead, blue lake, whose shores gave no

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promise, whose flanking hills had been forgotten of God! Gregory fumed over the unknown wretch who had wrecked the iron train. Poor Gregory! Little he knew that, merited though it might have been, the reproof his own boot had given had delayed the precious freight, had lost Ogden for his Company, and thirty miles of road.

Idle men make no muscle. Gregory knew it, and chafed still more, as he fretted about the camp, keeping away from his guests and his anxious-eyed wife. And now the welcome whistle once again! Preparations so carefully made were reinspected. The camp awoke. Idle men stretched themselves; lazy ones regretfully, honest ones gladly. Buttons, straps, buckles, shoes, hats, tobacco—all were made ready, for every one knew that to-morrow would spare no moment for broken gear, for longing tongues.

To the very tip-end of the last rail the construction train had been pushed, the iron train close behind it, and iron dropped in piles beside the track, when both trains had backed to the rear. The little, low car that moved the iron was loaded; every foreman charged his gang, looked after his tools; every man set his teeth for to-morrow's work.

Long before daylight the camp was aroused. The cooks' calls followed quickly, and breakfast was taken a-gulp. With the first dawn-glow that could show a hammer head where to find a spike, the ringing racket began. Men on the trot pushed the little iron car—little, yet how heavy!—back and forth over the newly laid rails, dropping a fresh supply at the track end,

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each time the previous load had been spiked a few rods to the eastward.

Another tooting of whistles, and the trains moved up. The rails rang loud upon one another as they fell to the ground, half a mile ahead of the morning camp. The foremen urged, encouraged, inspected, hurried. Faster and faster the rails dropped into place! Blow upon blow, spikes and bolts were driven home. And so on through the hot, late April day. Every boss was alert. Every man did his best; perhaps was sworn at for not doing better. Only Bennett, calm, unhurrying, held his men to their task with neither curses nor bluster; and Bennett's gang had the brunt of the fray.

Mrs. Gregory and her guests watched unwearyingly the great work-drama unfold; the miles, rail by rail, banded together in the glorious iron way. At what cost was it done! Yet how great was the result!

"Is it always so?" Esther asked, looking up at Alfred. "Must the road to great achievements be always by way of the sweat of the face, the heart's blood?"

His look was tender, comprehending. "Are they not worth the cost?"

"Yes, yes; I must believe they are." Yet she turned away, her eyes blurred with tears. She was thinking of Gideon alone under his posies.

Dinner was a farce for time, if not for quantity. And all the afternoon men with pails and dippers marched up and down the sweating line, serving to the

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thirsty incredible quantities of warm, brackish water that was nectar to the sweating men.

A short pause for supper, and at it again! Night came on, and a moon. Eastward they could see the campfires of their oncoming rivals. They answered with their own huge bonfires, built to reinforce Luna's pale ray.

On and on, hour after hour; there was no talking, not even the desultory interjections of the day, or the raucous orders of the foremen. Muscles moved automatically. Hammers struck as rhythmically, but more slowly. Each man bent to his task with grim endurance, too weary to protest. Some sank down and were allowed to crawl away.

All day, Gregory, pale and tense, had raged up and down the line, directing, crying orders far and near, calling for the impossible, often getting the unexpected. He hurried men, scored individuals, anathematized tools, earth, iron, heat. He was impatient, fiercely eager; yet, with it all, not far from every honest heart there; for he was fighting for the Company—and success. Dearer to him it was than any enterprise of his own ever would be. The men knew this, and honored him, bore with him, respected him, for the achievement, which many declared no other man could have made.

In the dead of night, when the air was chill upon wet, weary backs,—when men were dropping from fatigue, and others, more dogged, were working on, praying silently for relief,—at last, down the line came Gregory's jubilant cry.

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"Rozel!"

No man among them all had worked as hard as he had worked. Month by month his flesh had dropped away, his cheek tanned darker, as he fought his way from ocean to inland sea. The spare, square frame and the seamed face had changed him, aged him sadly. He had paid in heart and body on this tremendous project. And to his anxious wife, praying for this conflict to end, no less than to the exhausted men, his cry came like a glad clarion.

"It's ten miles, boys! Ten miles in one day! There's their camp! We'll touch Union Pacific rails to-morrow at Promontory!"

"Hooray! Another stride of the Central Pacific's seven-league boots toward Brigham's drove of tender ewes!" cried some impertinent voice.

Hammers dropped. Backs unbent, nor recked of pain. Cheer after cheer rent the still night. Ten miles! Ten miles! The greatest day's work in the world's railroad history!

Gregory went to his car happy, kissed his wife, joined his guests in a jolly supper, and slept,—slept as he had not for months.

CHAPTER XII

FREEDOM AT LAST

FROM all America, from Europe and from the North, they came to join that monster excursion to the Front.

San Francisco was awake at last. New York and Chicago had invaded her domain. Into her home preserves, to her very doors, they carried their audacious fight for business; cut her territory clean away with their broadsword of low prices. Like other laggards, she exulted over the victory she had tried to make defeat; and called aloud, "Come all good Americans, come all the world, help us celebrate!" Even the Sacramento "Clarion" in a burst of justice resented this, and announced to the world the names of the men, the city, and the two or three counties that, not only without San Francisco, but in spite of her, had accomplished the achievement of the age.

Now began to arrive forerunners of the event: the polished laurel tie and its silver plate, with an inscription that is to-day historic; the four-hundred-dollar golden spike, topped with a nugget as long as itself; the heavy silver hammer; the gold, silver, and iron spikes from Arizona.

Gregory rushed from one task to another, sending back to California the greater part of his forces and apparatus, that they might pierce other mountains,

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conquer other deserts with new iron highways. Mr. Crocker was no less busy, flying back and forth between the Front and Salt Lake City, where the horde of visitors increased each day. Governor Stanford and his fellow-directors were there also, sleeplessly planning, organizing, making capital and influence with the leaders of the great inland hierarchy.

Alfred, quite recovered, was indispensable in many ways, hastening the tremendous cleaning, polishing, preparing, that proceeded steadily among all concerned, from stoker to President.

They were counting the time before the event by hours, when Alfred, carrying a telegram and an open letter, hurried up to Mr. Crocker.

"I'm called suddenly East, to my father, Mr. Crocker. I wish to be released, to go immediately."

"What? What, boy? Is your father dead?"

"No, sir; it's—it's a business matter."

"Business! A business matter?" the Superintendent repeated incredulously. "We can't spare you, Vincent—not for a month, at least. Settle your business by telegraph! Write your telegram—never mind length—and I'll frank it for you."

"It's a matter that I can't send over the wire, sir."

"Jove! Put it off, then! It'll keep. I'll let you go the first of June."

Alfred burst the bonds of years. "I can't wait, Mr. Crocker! Not a day! For nearly eight years I've been an outcast from home and name, sir. As I've hoped for reinstatement at home, with hand and foot, heart and brain, I've served this railroad. The

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girl I wished to marry, but could not, has suffered incredibly for my sake. Now it is all cleared up. My father telegraphs me to come, waits for me in Saint Louis. And you ask me to delay, Mr. Crocker! To send messages! I can't do it. Not an hour beyond the first all-by-rail train East!"

Mr. Crocker's heart warmed. The end of the long struggle had already wiped years from his face. Now the careworn man fled altogether, and left a joyous boy.

"By George, Vincent! You shall go,—go day after to-morrow on the overland special. And joy go with you. But come back soon to us. We'll have a good job for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Crocker," Alfred said earnestly, wringing the offered hand, and hastening off to find Esther.

She was coming down the steps of Gregory's car.

"Read that!" He thrust the letter into her hand, and stood by her side while she looked it over. It was dated at Boston.

"DEAR ALFRED: My Aunt Almira is dead, and has left me three thousand dollars. With this I've been able to pay the last dollar; and my statement is to be forwarded to your father to-night. He is travelling in the West; but his Saint Louis address is the same as formerly. I am now released from my promise of secrecy, and by the time you receive this your father will know how unjust he has been to you, how kind to the real criminal. At last I have vindicated you! But for you I should be in prison, or worse; my father dead of sorrow, my family disgraced. I shall waste no words

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in thanking you. God alone knows what you have been to me; I cannot tell it.

“Ever your humble, grateful
“MAX.”

“*Mr. Alfred Vincent Osborn.*”

“Now this!” Alfred thrust the telegram into her hand before she could speak. It was sent from Saint Louis, and signed, “George Osborn.”

“Have just learned all from Max. If you can forgive your father, come at once. I will await you here.”

Esther looked up, but her eyes were too misty for seeing. “Poor Max! Poor Al—no, no! Noble Alfred!”

He was too overwrought for attention, even for gentleness. He caught both her hands, heedless of passing eyes. “I want you to marry me! To-night! To start home—*home* with me on the first train after the jubilee. No, don’t speak, yet!” he added quickly as she opened her lips. “Let me tell you! I’ll telegraph for the Episcopalian missionary at Ogden,—there’ll be time. If he can’t come, I’ll wire Billy Dodge to pick up a minister somewhere on his trip to-day. We’ll take the Harmons, Mrs. Gregory, if she’ll go, and be at Sally B.’s in four hours. While I run down to Elko for the license,—Mr. Crocker’ll let me have the engine, I know,—you can be packing. I’ll follow Uncle Billy in and we’ll be married! It won’t be much of a wedding, but—do we care for dry-goods and ceremony?” He looked eagerly into her face.

“Oh, Alfred, how—” she began tremulously.

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"Don't, dearest! Don't speak yet! If you'll only think just a minute I know it will be 'Yes'!"

She smiled at his impetuosity, astonished at this unwonted vehemence. This was a new, a free Alfred. He was coming into his own, taking possession; and of her with the rest. All her being yielded gladly to his importuning; yielded with that deep gratitude for strength and support that only a large, strong woman can feel, upon whom many have leaned, and whom none have considered.

"Yes, Alfred. At once, and anywhere with you!"

She walked in a dream up the car steps; he shot off blithely to execute his plans.

They carried successfully; and that night in Sally B.'s rude home, on the mountain-top and under desert stars, the simple marriage was celebrated. Uncle Billy gave the bride away, and mourned because he had no wedding bonnet for his darling. If his old heart was heavy, and the sun had dropped out of his sky, he dissembled so gallantly that even Esther was deceived. Mrs. Harmon rejoiced, though "two of her dear children had become one." Judge Harmon blustered a little incoherently about the theft of "his dear girl"; but deluded no one.

But Sally B., happy in Esther's happiness, was yet bereft. Later she sobbed out her loneliness against her husband's breast. That was his moment of illumination. "Pore little critter! Ye've got Bill left, ye know. We'll prospect the rest of life on the same lead, won't we, honey? Git bright! It'll be sun-up soon, honey!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE WEDDING OF THE RAILS

A GLORIOUS, cloudless day! The tenth of May, 1869.

Beside the majestic inland sea, gathered there from near and from half the world away, men and women had come to celebrate the culmination of two tremendous enterprises.

Against calumny, against plot and counterplot, against the power of money and bribery, against old Time himself, had the Central Pacific Railroad come to completion. On pork, beans, "licey," and pluck had it been builded, teaching the world its greatest lesson in iron.

Surmounting similar obstacles the Union Pacific had come westward to meet it. And here, in the heart of the continent, amidst cheers, speeches, and the screaming of whistles, the final blow was struck, the day made historic.

Early in the morning magnificent trains came from each way bearing officials and dignitaries. Following them thronged the sightseers.

Esther and Alfred were there, standing near the Central Pacific officers, both radiant, unmasked of reserve, young, beautiful with happiness. Close at hand were Uncle Billy, the Harmons, and Amabel Hamilton, delicate, flower-like, bravely carrying a heartache that Alfred least of all suspected.

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And Sally B.! No pen could paint the vividness of her cardinal plush gown, the sweep of the forty-dollar plume above her red Gainsborough hat, the gleam of her jewels, or the pride in the uplift of her dark head. Regal, brilliant, as glad of the great triumph as if it were her own, she drew every eye, dominated the scene, clamorously red against the surrounding gray.

Not the least striking among that remarkable assemblage was George Gregory. Erect as he had not been for months, well groomed and handsome in his faultless clothes, jubilant, he was yet restless from the very lifting of his burden, and tacked from shore to shore in the human sea, coming to anchor at intervals beside his wife.

But the eye of the vast throng, shifting from notable to notable, came oftenest to rest upon the "Valiant Four," a quartette of keen, complementing minds, the power that had driven to completion the most difficult enterprise of the era.

Mark Hopkins, the Treasurer, looked small beside the others; yet his body was vigorous, his eye vigilant, his lip firm. A fine, penetrating exactness, a rigid carefulness, enveloped him as a garment. A stern man, a just, employees and foster-children yet testified to his kindness, his consideration.

Bluff, hearty Charles Crocker, the Superintendent, irascible, obstinate, yet reasonable, was also the daring, the generous, the pioneer!

Next stood Collis P. Huntington, the Vice-President, tall, stately, elegant, the keen financier, the

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astute business man, the subtle politician, the keeper of secrets; a tireless worker, a courtly gentleman.

Leland Stanford, the President, ex-Governor of California, beloved of the people, this man was the cynosure: imperial head powerfully set on a massive body; eyes of the seer, brows of the conqueror; mind of steel and heart of gold; brother of men and respecter of man; orator, friend, patriot.

Talleyrand once declared to the Emperor Napoleon, "The great Republic is a giant without bones." These four men had put into the giant a spine of iron.

Under the desert sky the spreading multitude was called to order. There followed a solemn prayer of thanksgiving. The laurel tie was placed, amidst ringing cheers. The golden spike was set. The trans-American telegraph wire was adjusted. Amid breathless silence the silver hammer was lifted, poised, dropped, giving the gentle tap that ticked the news to all the world! Then, blow on blow, Governor Stanford sent the spike to place!

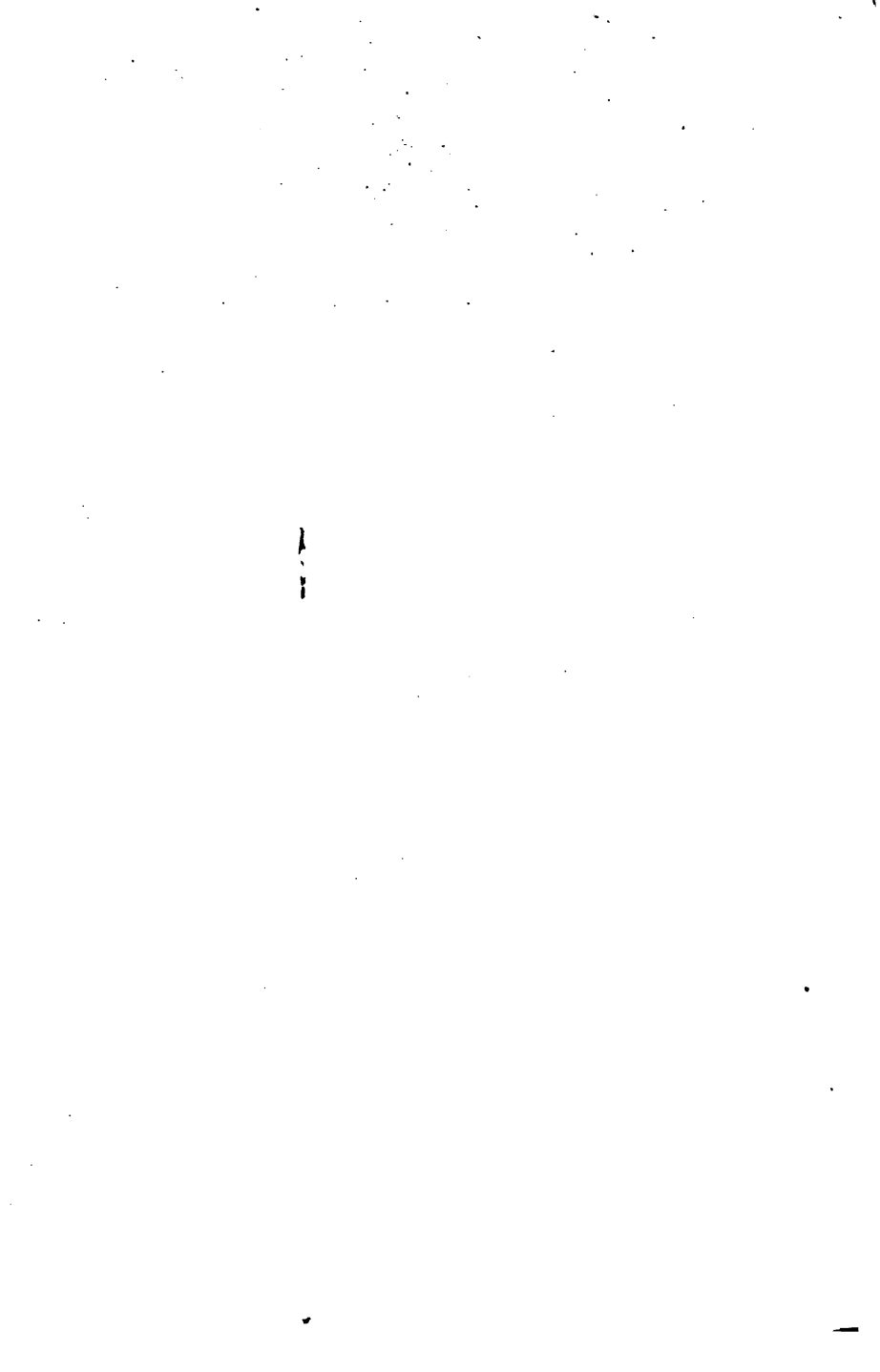
A storm of wild huzzas burst forth; desert rock and sand, plain and mountain, echoed the conquest of their terrors. The two engines moved up, "touched noses," and each in turn crossed the magic tie.

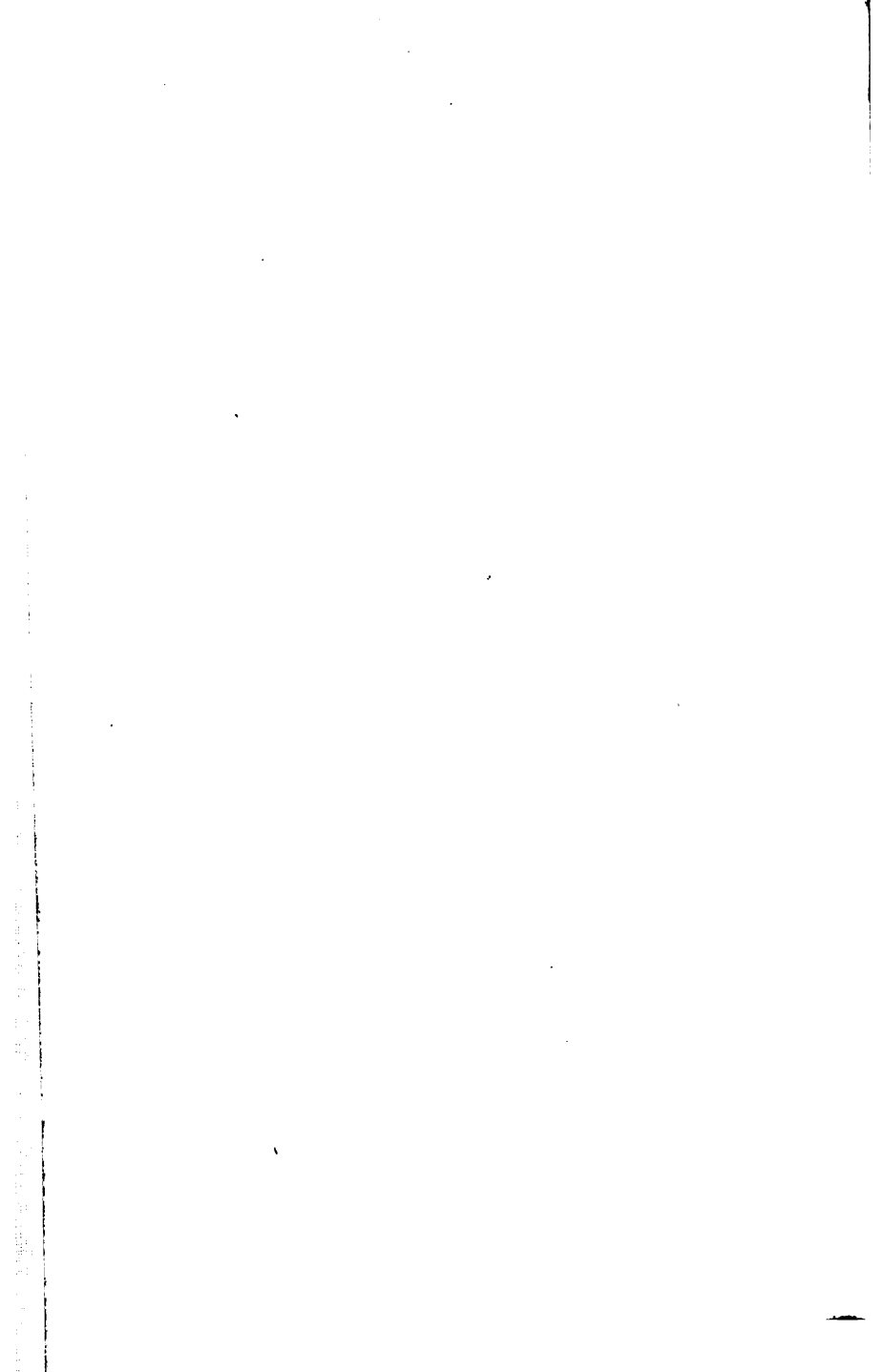
America was belted! The great Iron Way was finished.

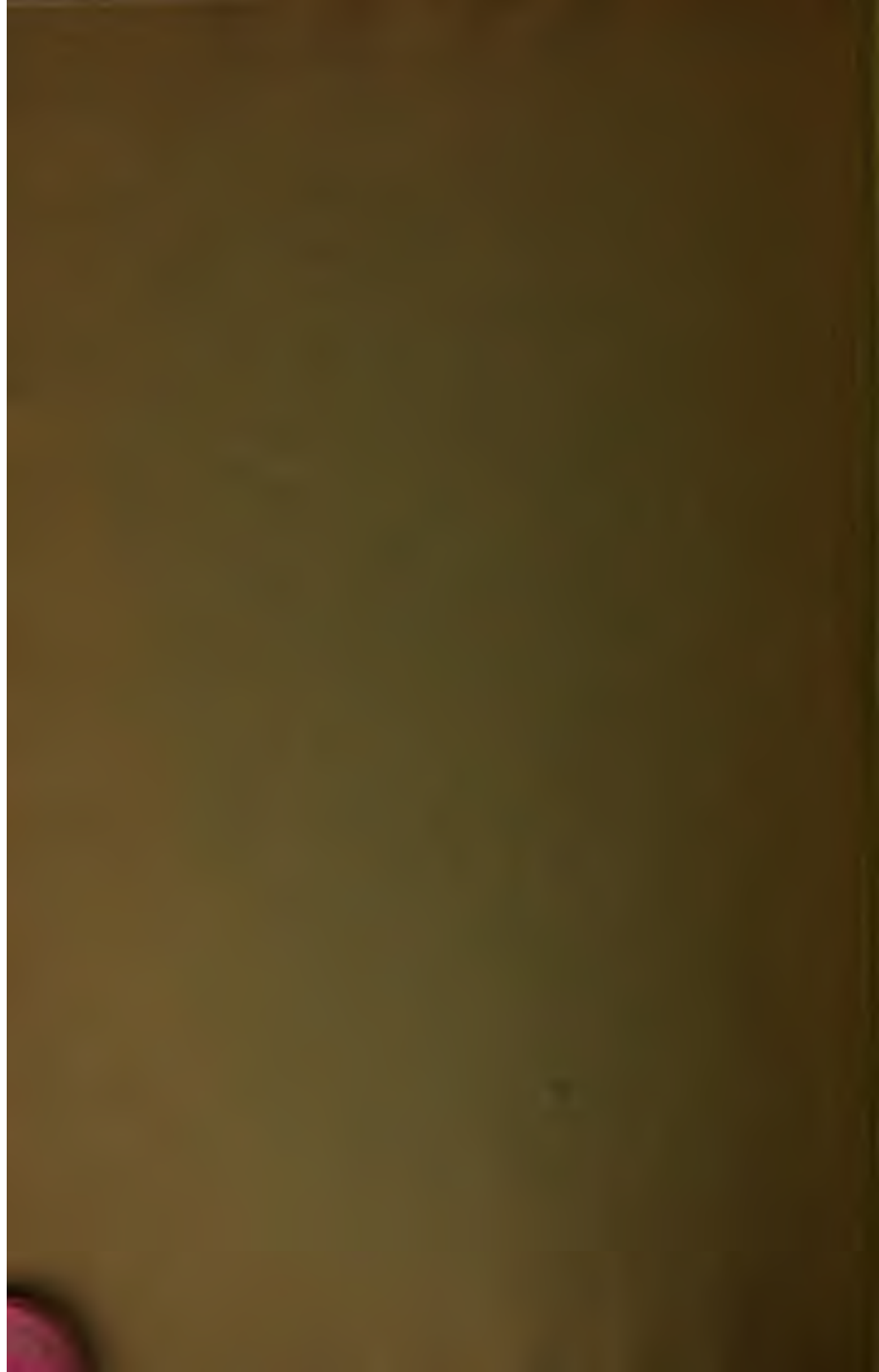
THE END

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